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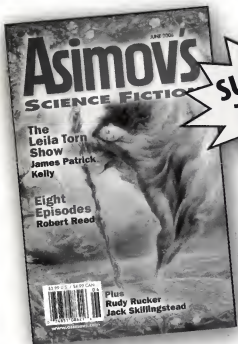
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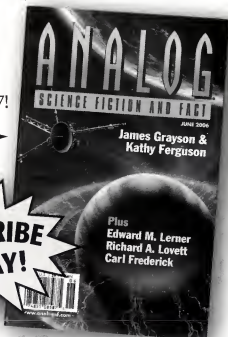
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JANUARY 2007

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ANNIVERSARIES

With this issue, *Asimov's* enters its thirtieth year of publication. We intend to celebrate this event throughout the year. Every 2007 issue will carry a banner proclaiming our milestone. Naturally, we are a long way from knowing all the stories that will be published in 2007, but we have some terrific material on hand. With stories by writers like Nancy Kress, Charles Stross, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Jim Grimsley, Brian Stableford, Tom Purdom, Robert Reed, Mary Rosenblum, and Neal Asher, and stories promised from Lucius Shepard, Ian McDonald, James Patrick Kelly, and Connie Willis, every issue in 2007 will be a special one.

An anthology commemorating the anniversary will be released by Tachyon Publications in the summer. This book is a representative sampling of the stories that have appeared in *Asimov's* over the past thirty years. It will include a cover by Michael Whelan, and work by Isaac Asimov, Octavia Butler, Bruce Sterling, Ursula K. Le Guin, and many, many others. While poring through hundreds of issues and thousands of stories to determine the table of contents, I was once again awed by the hours of enjoyment and the quality of the work this magazine has provided. Alas, an anthology is finite. We will omit a far greater number of worthy stories than we will reprint, but the book will provide you with a chance to sample, or to reacquaint yourself with, the magazine's history.

This summer will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of my own professional association with this remarkable magazine. I helped finish up the production of the November 1982 issue (volume 6, whole number 58—the issue that contained David Brin's riveting novella, "The Postman"), and I've been celebrating *Asimov's* anniversaries ever since. Our tenth anniversary issue (volume 11, whole number 116) included Pat Murphy's Nebula-Award-winning novelette "Rachel in Love." To commemorate the anniversary, I participated in a talk with Isaac Asimov at New York City's packed West Side YMCA. Five years later, the cover blurb read "Spectacular 15th Anniversary Double Issue" Also identified as volume 16, whole numbers 184/185, it included Isaac's Foundation novella, "Cleon the Emperor." The story tied with Lucius Shepard's "Barnacle Bill the Spacer" for the magazine's Readers' Award. Although Isaac died that year, it was his fond wish that the magazine continue after him. I'm sure he would be delighted to find, fifteen years later, that *Asimov's* still holds a central position in the field.

Of course, we plan to continue making history, too. April/May 2007 (volume 31, whole numbers 375/376) will be our official anniversary issue. Although its final content is undecided, the current line-up includes stories by Robert Silverberg, Jack McDevitt, Karen

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Joy Fowler, Mike Resnick, Michael Swanwick, and Gene Wolfe, as well as a new Coyote tale by Allen M. Steele. We've also been busy finding new writers and publishing the works of those who are just beginning to forge their reputations. In addition to a feature by the magazine's four previous editors and a personal reflection about the magazine by Robert Silverberg, the issue should include a number of other nonfiction surprises. An ideal piece for April/May would be a letters column by you, our readers—both long-term and brand new—consisting of reflections of your own. To make the deadline for that issue, please be sure to put your thoughts about your association with the magazine down on paper or email as soon as possible. See the box on page 11 for information on where to send these letters.

Like you, I'm looking forward to celebrating many more anniversaries with the magazine. I can't wait to see what jewels the five hundredth issue will bring, what classic will be published in the fortieth anniversary year, and onward. I'll look forward to hearing your comments about the stories published now and in the years ahead as well.

A word about the cover: Our current issue is the third January in consecutive years to carry stock art by Michael Whelan. It's also the

first time that a piece of cover art has been chosen to illustrate a poem. I was familiar with Michael's lovely painting, "L'Echelle," when John Morressy submitted his poem, "The Wings of Icarus," to the magazine, and I knew the two works would go together perfectly. John's short stories were published in *Asimov's* in 1979 and 1983, but he is probably most strongly associated with his numerous tales about the Wizard Kedrigern that have appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* over the years.

I first met John and his wife Barbara at a small convention in New Hampshire in 1984. They were warm and gracious, and immediately put a terribly shy assistant editor at ease. My poetry inventory was rather bountiful when John's poem showed up in my office so I took my time about getting a contract out to him. A gentle nudge came on March 8, 2006. I apologized for the delay, and told him that I hoped to match the poem with a Michael Whelan cover. On March 9, he replied, "The possibility of a Whelan cover for my little poem will give me the patience of Prometheus." On March 20, 2006, John died suddenly of a heart attack. Barbara Morressy patiently shepherded the poem through the contract and production process, and I want to thank her for making its publication a reality. ○

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Best Dramatic Presentation: Short Form

Doctor Who: "The Empty Child" and "The Doctor Dances"

FARMING

I'm a science fiction sort of guy. I've written some fantasy, and edited some fantasy anthologies, but I don't really read very much of it, and, when I do it, what I reach for tends to be something of the sly, somewhat tongue-in-cheek sort that John W. Campbell, Jr. used to publish in his classic magazine of long ago, *Unknown Worlds*, or one of E.R. Eddison's heroic Norse-derived epics, rather than one of the multivolume sagas about Finding the Rightful Prince who will wield the Wand of Power (or Sword, or Ring), against the Dark Lord in the Great Apocalyptic Battle of Good against Evil. The Prince/Wand/Dark Lord saga is okay now and then, I suppose, and some of the big modern fantasy sagas are pretty gorgeous stuff—I think in particular of George R.R. Martin's superb *Song of Ice and Fire* novels—but for me a little of that goes quite a long way.

I don't play computer games, either. Don't know a thing about them, in fact. Some of my aversion to them is simply a generational thing, an unwillingness to spend time in front of a computer screen for anything but doing my work and getting my e-mail and looking things up on the Internet. But also I suspect that a lot of the computer games are just more Defeat the Dark Lord stuff, full of elves and wizards and dragons and spells, and there are other things I'd rather do in the remaining years of my finite life span than wage com-

puterized warfare against the Powers of Abysmal Evil. My loss, perhaps, but so be it. I don't do crossword puzzles, either, or bungee jumping, or rock-climbing, because, though I know such activities afford great delight to many people, my *a priori* hunch is that there isn't much in them for me.

This combination of my lack of interest in formula Evil Wizard fantasy and my sense that most computer games draw upon those very formulas has kept me from learning anything much about them. The other day, though, I saw a story in the *New York Times* about computer games that not only drew my attention to the computer-game milieu but, well, opened gateways into new realms of wonder for me. Not that the piece awakened any desire in me to start playing the games myself—far from it. But what I learned about the world of game-playing was so surprising in its perversity that it provided me with a little chill of sociological awe, the tingle of excitement that comes from peering into an alien world.

The idea behind most and perhaps all computer games, apparently, is that the successful player acquires "wealth" as he plays, in the form of some sort of virtual "money" that is legal tender only in the world of that game, and uses that "wealth" to purchase more and more power in that fantasy world, until at last he can slay dragons with a flick of his eyebrow, or, maybe, leap tall buildings at a sin-

gle bound. This is the same general idea that is found in such archaic games as Monopoly, where by means of successful rolls of the dice you gradually acquire real estate in Atlantic City and become a tycoon by making your fellow players pay rent on it to you. The chief difference (and bear with me if I'm getting some of this wrong) is that the Monopoly tycoon is trying to acquire such properties as Marvin Gardens and Boardwalk, and the computer-game aficionado seeks possession of the most potent magical spells, swords, talismans, and wands.

As I recall from my Monopoly games of sixty years ago, there's no way to get possession of the major properties except by rolling the dice and following the rules. But, to my amazement, I learn from the *Times* not only that it's possible to use illicit means to become a big deal in the world of your computer game but that a whole industry has sprung up in China that is geared to making actual real-world money by selling virtual merchandise to computer-game cheaters who want to get to the top of their fantasy universe the quick way.

The way you cheat at the games, I'm told, is to go to one of the many websites specializing in this kind of operation—"farming," it's called—and simply *buy*, for very real money charged against your credit card, a belt of invulnerability or an enchanted sword or a stipulated quantity of magical gold or virtual warriors or whatever commodity it is that will allow you to ascend to higher levels of power in the game of your choice. Doing this is supposedly prohibited by the terms of use of most of the games, but that doesn't seem to matter much. Thus a *Times* reporter who in real life

plays a game called "World of Warcraft" received an unsolicited e-message from a certain Hasfdllf, inviting him to go to a website where for \$9.99 he could buy one hundred virtual gold coins that are legal tender in the "Warcraft" universe, with discounts available to quantity buyers—\$76.99 would get one thousand of the coins, for example.

Anybody with more cash than scruples could thus rise instantly to a level of great might in "Warcraft" without having to bother to win those gold coins by clicking away at his computer in the dreary old-fashioned way. For instance, it can take six hundred hours or more of playing to reach Level Sixty, the highest power plateau of "World of Warcraft." The entry-level player is capable only of killing piddling little creatures, it seems—the fantasy equivalents of mice or gerbils—and if he kills enough of those he can buy the ability to slaughter trolls or kobolds, and eventually, having pocketed the treasure of his victims and invested it in ever more puissant magical equipment, he finds himself up there on Level Sixty where one can lay waste to whole legions of fire-breathing demons or great tail-lashing dragons or what have you.

I find all this quite astonishing. It seems to me—stodgy non-player that I am—that the whole point of the game, if there is one, is to hone one's skill through level after level until one has the great satisfaction of reaching maximum power. Thus one demonstrates, at least to oneself, that one has the sort of superior mental powers that a true Cosmagogue of the Vasty Deep ought to have. Great virtual effort brings great virtual rewards, as should always be the case in any kind of en-

deavor. But no, no: a lot of the players are impatient, it appears, and they go to some anonymous on-line "farmer" and buy his accumulated tokens of power and thereby get a fast-track ascent to big-time wizardry without having to exert themselves at all.

Who are these "farmers" who deal in wizard-gold?

They operate out of China, mainly. Game-farming is big business there. Chinese entrepreneurs have established game-playing factories, hundreds or maybe thousands of them, in which platoons of grim-faced young men earn their livings as full-time gamers, putting in twelve hours a day waging electronic warfare in imaginary kingdoms or distant galaxies. These expert players, as they skillfully annihilate the ogres and basilisks that they confront, pile up huge treasuries of the game-world's virtual currency—which their employers then sell to foreign geeks eager for an easy ride to the upper levels of their game.

"For the Chinese in game-playing factories like these," the *Times* story says, "it is not all fun and games. These workers have strict quotas and are supervised by bosses who equip them with computers, software, and Internet connections. . . . By some estimate there are well over a hundred thousand people working in China as full-time gamers, toiling away in dark Internet cafes, abandoned warehouses, small offices, and private homes. Many of the players here actually make less than a quarter an hour, but they often get room, board, and free computer-game play in these 'virtual sweatshops.'" One of them, a twenty-three-year-old player interviewed by the *Times*, says he makes about two hundred and fifty

dollars a month at it, which he regards as pretty good pay, by Chinese standards. Of course, he works a seven-day week, twelve hours a day; but the upside is that he puts in all those hours sitting at a keyboard playing computer games instead of mining coal or assembling television sets or hauling heavy trays as a waiter in the local noodle house.

Significant amounts of money are involved here. It's estimated that one hundred million people worldwide log on to play these games each month, and evidently a *lot* of them are fattening their virtual prestige by purchasing their super-wizardhood on the black market. This is, of course, unfair to the players who have acquired the Mask of Invisibility or the All-Conquering Lance the hard way, putting in all those sweaty hours squinting into their screens, and the games-makers are trying to shut down the farmers whenever they can find them. But finding them isn't easy and there isn't any simple way for one player to discover that someone else in his game is cheating.

I find the emergence of this kind of geeky cheating very sad. The real pleasure of playing these games, I would think, ought to be derived from mastering the game and deploying your accumulated skills in rising to wizardly greatness, not in attaining instant self-aggrandizement by pulling out your Visa and buying some magical gizmo for your game avatar that you haven't earned according to the rules. How can you face yourself, you who have bought your way into the Tower of Supreme Omnipotence, when you know that you got there not by battling monster after monster through level after level, but merely by forking over eighty bucks for a pile of vir-

tual doubloons that some unknown Chinese kid in a far-off sweatshop won for you? What's to be proud of in that? Where's the fun in cutting a deal with a shaman-for-hire to do all the heavy lifting? What sort of incremental increase in self-esteem does that sort of deal bring? And what do you think J.R.R. Tolkien would say if he heard that Aragorn's sword or even the One Ring itself were for sale to the highest bidder on eBay?

Not only isn't it sporting, guys, I don't see where there can be much satisfaction in it. Cheating at a computer game is on a par with cheating at solitaire: who are you fooling?

And it's a troublesome cultural development. If the notion of buying virtual glory were to spread to other fields, we'd soon be hearing about the tournament chess player who can buy an instant checkmate, or

the professional baseball player who, for a sufficient outlay of cash, is given a certificate declaring that he has broken Barry Bonds' home-run record, or the tone-deaf singer who purchases a starring role at the Metropolitan Opera House. (Or, closer to home, the science fiction writer who buys a Hugo or a Nebula online.) But nobody is likely to do such things, because everyone would see what a hollow triumph is thereby gained. Paying hard cash to become an instant Aragorn seems just as dumb to me. Of course, I've never experienced the thrills of game-playing. But I like to think that if I were a gamer, I'd feel abashed, not proud at all, if I had tossed away a few hundred real-world simoleons for the empty thrill of ascending the Throne of Unconquerable Might without having had to waste all that time working my way up through the ranks. ○

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SECRETS OF THE WEBMASTERS (Part Two)

fanzines

You may recall that in the last installment, before profiling **Locus Online** <locusmag.com> Webmaster Mark Kelly, I began with a discourse on social capital. Briefly, social capital is the sense of belonging that binds a community together; it requires intense social interactions that build trust and shared values. I contend that our websites, our cons, our discussion groups and mailing lists are all expressions of just such an intense social interaction, and that SF has a vast reserve of social capital.

Of course, this column is called "On the Net," but I would be remiss were I not to point out that much of our social capital was created not by websites but by print fanzines. Indeed, although technology has had a profound effect on fannish communication—now it's cheaper, faster, more interactive, and can reach just about anyone, anywhere—our websites retain much in common with their print progenitors.

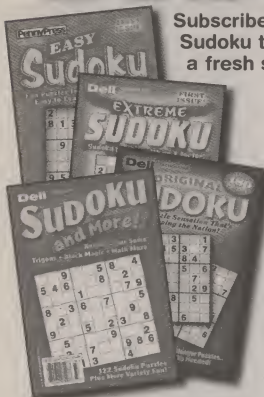
I can't go into a complete history of fanzines, which have been around since the 1930s. The word "fanzine" was actually coined by **Russ Chauvenet** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russ_Chauvenet> in 1941. Many of SF's greatest professional writers got their starts in fanzines, for instance **Damon Knight** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Damon_Knight>,

Harlan Ellison <harlanellison.com>, **Robert Silverberg** <maji.poor.com>, and **Frederik Pohl** <members.tripod.com/templetongate/pohl.htm>, to name just four who went on to become SFWA Grandmasters. But the vast majority of fanzine writers and editors are content to express their likes and dislikes, their passions and quirks without any expectation other than that other fans will read and respond.

The place to start any research into fan activity is the **FANAC Fan History Project** <fanac.org>, where you can find links to some of the older printzines that have been translated to the web. Another great resource is **eFanzines.com**, **science fiction fanzines on-line** <efanzines.com>. Fanzine writers, editors, and readers have gathered every year since 1984 at a convention called **Corflu** <corflu.org>. Ever since 1955, the **World Science Fiction Society** <worldcon.org> has given a Hugo for Best Fanzine <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugo_Award_for_Best_Fanzine>. And in 2004, history was made when, for the first time, the fanzine Hugo went to a 'zine that was primarily distributed electronically: Cheryl Morgan's **Emerald City** <emcit.com>. And while many wonderful print fan-zines continue to be published every month, there is no question that fans have been

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turning from print to the web in greater and greater numbers since the turn of the century. Here are profiles of two more of the most influential webmasters writing today.

bestsf.net

Mark Watson was born in 1960 in **Colchester** <*colchester.net*>, England's oldest recorded town. (See the Roman Castle remains! Visit the Norman keep! Tour the English Civil War battle site!) He got a degree in librarianship, and from 1980 to the mid-nineties he was a traditional librarian. He got on the pre-web internet in 1993 and has since moved to a career in Knowledge Management. His earliest encounters with SF were the **Hugh Walters** <*www.wessex.clara.net/walters*> series, before coming upon Edgar Rice Burroughs, Isaac Asimov, and Robert A. Heinlein in his early teens. He wrote reams of SF as a teen but then it simply dried up overnight. Mark writes that "Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll in my late teens meant less time on SF, which picked up a bit in my mid-twenties, but would have stayed dormant except for me chancing upon a late 1980s **Gardner Dozois** <*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gardner_Dozois*> Annual Collection, and the rest is history. . ."

Mark started the **Best SF** <*bestsf.net*> website to promote "the best in short Science Fiction." It consists of his reviews of magazines and the various "Year's Best" collections and links to online stories. Before the site debuted in 2000, he had compiled a database of his reactions to the stories he'd read in Gardner's *The Year's Best Science*

Fiction annual collections and others to help him remember what he had read. "My dad," he writes, "had from my earliest memories, mid 1960s, been writing mini reviews of films he had watched into big ledgers, so I guess it's something in the genes." He creates the site using Windows Notepad(!) and spends varying amounts of time working on it. "Over the last few months, less than an hour a week, as I've been spending about sixty hours a week working on my social work website **Care Knowledge** <*careknowledge.com*> which pays the bills!" He has no help with the site other than from a few publishers who supply him with review copies. He spends about a hundred dollars a year on domain registration and webspace; on top of that, buying books and magazines is probably his biggest expense. He writes that, "Before moving house a couple of years ago and taking on a bigger mortgage, the spending (don't tell the wife) could get out of hand." For example, he had to pay over a hundred dollars for the paperback of Gardner's rare *First Annual Collection*. Mark estimates that he gets more than twenty thousand unique visits a year to Best SF and that his audience is spread broadly, although somewhat younger than the typical SF readership.

Why did Mark create the site? "I'm a librarian, and have been since I was thirteen, when I started classifying my book collection—Asimov and Burroughs mostly. I like helping people and Best SF does what I do professionally—help social workers get a hold of the books and other publications that they need." And would he quit his day job if it were possible to

make a living from Best SF? "Yes, and if I was in my early twenties and unmarried, I'd probably try it, although I can't see how it could generate enough money to pay for a single twenty year old."

There are vanishingly few critics who will attempt to read and review most of the short SF published. Because of this, these hearty souls have a huge influence on the critical discourse of the genre, second only to those of the Best of the Year anthologists. In my time as a writer, I have avidly read the opinions of **Orson Scott Card** <hatrack.com>, **Mark Kelly** <locusmag.blogspot.com>, **Bluejack** <bluejack.com> (aka L. Blunt Jackson), **Rich Horton** <sff.net/people/richard.horton>, and **Lois Tilton** <irosf.com/user/show.qsml?loaduser=10725> on the current state of short fiction. I find Mark Watson to be one of the most astute of this select group.

mumpsimus.blogspot.com

Matt Cheney works at a boarding school in central New Hampshire, where he's an English teacher and Director of Performing Arts. He studied Dramatic Writing at New

York University and got his B.A. in English from the University of New Hampshire. He's currently working toward a Master's at Dartmouth, and will be writing a thesis on **Samuel Delany** <pcc.com/staff/jay/delany>. Matt started reading SF with some 1986 issues of *Asimov's*. "I was in, I think, fourth or fifth grade. My entire perspective on what SF is and can be was shaped by the early Dozois issues of *Asimov's* and by his *Year's Best SF Fifth Annual Collection*. Actually, most of it was shaped by reading **Karen Joy Fowler's** <sfwa.org/members/Fowler> story "**The Faithful Companion at Forty**" <iblist.com/book16542.htm> and trying to figure out why it was SF. I read the story over and over, because I was sure that since it was published in an SF magazine, it must be SF, and I must be missing something. So people who blame me for having an overly generous definition of SF, and a desire to keep that definition broad and all-encompassing, should really blame Gardner Dozois for publishing that story."

Matt's blog **The Mumpsimus** <mumpsimus.blogspot.com> debuted in August of 2003. In just three years, his postings there

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have earned him a reputation as one of the genre's smartest critics. Although now he also has a regular column on **Strange Horizons** <strangehorizons.com> and many guest reviews on other sites, he is best known for The Mumpsimus. The technology behind his site is basic **Blogger** <blogger.com>. He writes almost all of his blog, although he will sometimes have guest reviewers when he can afford to send books out, since he has time to read only about 10 percent of what gets sent to him. There is very little cost or revenue associated with The Mumpsimus. Matt writes, "I like not having much cost or revenue from the site, because that way I don't feel compelled to do anything other than what I want to do. If I want to write about obscure books or movies that nobody much cares about, I do. I'm sure plenty of people would like me to make the site only about one sort of thing, but nothing in my life is about one sort of thing, and so I revel in the polyphonic mess I've created."

He usually spends a few hours on The Mumpsimus every week, although he says that sometimes that seems like too much. He's kept very busy as a full-time grad student and high school teacher.

When I asked him who he saw as his ideal audience, he wrote, "Anybody who reads the site has to have a high tolerance for reading about a wide range of subjects and types of literature. I'd get bored if I only wrote about one sort of thing all the time. I think the reason I've so happily taken to blogging is that the weblog medium is the first I've found that feels like a good match for my personality—fragmented, open to all sorts of moods and tones,

a conglomeration of random influences and materials."

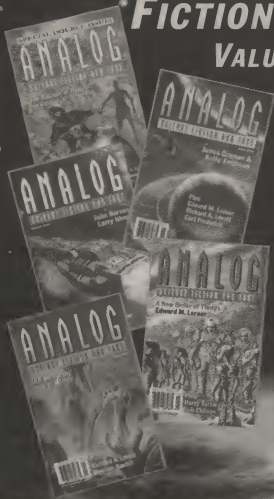
Matt reports that when he began The Mumpsimus, he was curious as to whether anyone would respond to it. He was surprised when the site became so popular and when people started arguing with him online. "This changed my relationship to the site, because suddenly I wasn't just writing for myself, I was writing for an actual audience. I often just throw ideas and observations out there to see what will happen, and to stir up some discussion. I'm a mischief-maker at heart. What I want to do, though, is challenge writers and readers to hold themselves to high standards, which for me are high standards of surprise—the things I tend to point to with the most praise are things that in some way surprised me."

So Matt, if you could make a living from Mumpsimus, would you quit your day job? "I wouldn't want to have to make my living from my writing, because it would change my relationship to the writing. I don't feel any need to appease any sort of audience, because I don't need the writing to pay my bills."

exit

Truth in reporting section: Aside from being some of the most important webmasters in the genre, Mark Watson and Matt Cheney are two of the nicest people I know. I'm proud to call them my friends. And while I have never actually met Mark Watson, I have been a huge fan of his site since the day he invited me to review it, as readers of this column must certainly realize by now. ○

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SAFEGUARD

Nancy Kress

Four innocent children may hold the key to our survival, or total annihilation, in this powerful and riveting new tale.

The uniformed military aide appeared at her elbow just as Katherine Taney rose from her gilded chair to enter the Oval Office. "The president will see you now," his secretary said simultaneously with the aide's statement, "Wait a moment, Katie."

She turned to stare at him. Keep the president waiting? But his face told. For a moment vertigo nearly took her, a swooping blackness, but only for a moment. She said quietly to the aide, "Another one?"

"Two more. Possibly three."

Dear God.

"Ma'am," chided the secretary, "the president is ready."

She straightened her aging back, thought a quick prayer, and went to brief the commander-in-chief. No, not really to brief—to plead, with the war-battered United States government, for compassion in the face of the unthinkable.

In the beginning, Li remembered, there had been big faceless people, white as cartoons. These memories were quick and slippery, like dreams. The other children didn't have them at all. Since that time, there had been only the real cartoons, the world, and Taney.

He had realized a long time ago that Taney was a person inside a white cartoon covering, and that he himself was a person inside the world, another covering. The world must also have an outside because when Taney left after each visit, she couldn't have stayed for days in the space behind the leaving door. The space was too small, not even room to lie down to sleep. And what would she eat or drink in there until she came back? And where did she get the fried cakes and other things she brought them?

"There's another door, isn't there, Taney?" he said yet again as the five of them sat around the feeder in the Grove. The feeder had just brought up bowls of food, but no one except Sudie was eating them because Taney had brought a lot of fried cakes in a white bag. Sudie, always greedy, had eaten three fried cakes and half a bowl of stew and now slumped happily against a palm tree, her naked belly round and her lips greasy. Jana sat with her knees drawn up to her chin, her thin arms clasped around her legs. Kim stared at nothing.

Li repeated, "Another door. You go out of the world through another door, don't you?"

"I can't answer that," Taney said, as always. The girls didn't even glance at her. Li didn't expect them to; he was the only one who ever questioned Taney.

But tonight Jana, still gazing over her clasped knees at the shadow of trees against the sky, said, "Why can't you answer, Taney?"

Taney's head swiveled toward Jana. It was hard to see Taney's eyes through the faceplate on her white covering; you had to get very close and squint. The cartoons covered like Taney didn't even have eyes, no matter how much you squinted at them.

There hadn't been any new cartoons for a long while.

Taney finally said, "I can't answer you, Jana, because the world keeps you safe."

The old answer, the one they'd heard all their lives from Taney, from the cartoons. For the first time, Li challenged it. "How, Taney? How does the world keep us safe? Sudie still fell over that stone and you had to come and fix her arm. Jana ate that flower and all her food came out of her mouth." The next day, all of that kind of flower, all over the world, had disappeared.

Taney merely repeated, "The world keeps you safe."

Sudie said suddenly from her place against the tree, "Your voice is sad, Taney."

Jana said, "When will we get new cartoons?"

But Taney was already getting to her feet, slow and heavy in her white covering. Even Kim knew what that meant. Kim climbed onto Taney's lap and started to lick frantically at Taney's face, and it took both Sudie and Li to pull her back. Kim was tall and strong. Taney said, as always, "Be well, dear hearts," and started away.

Li, clutching the screaming Kim, watched Taney walk the path between the trees until he couldn't see her anymore. The leaving door was in a big pink rock at the small end of the world, near the pond. Maybe tomorrow they would splash in the pond. That might be fun.

Except that nothing was as much fun as it used to be. Li didn't know why, but it was true.

Eventually Kim stopped screaming and they let her go. Jana folded and refolded the white paper bag Taney had left her, making pretty shapes. The sky overhead and beside the Grove darkened. The feeder with its three untouched bowls and one empty one sank into the ground. The blankets rose, clean even though last night Kim had shit hers again.

The four children wrapped themselves in blankets and lay down on the grass. Within minutes all were asleep in the circling grove of antiseptic palm trees that produced no fruit, and whose fronds never rustled in the motionless air.

"Two-and-a-half enclosed acres. Double-built dome construction, translucent and virtually impenetrable. Negative air pressure with triple filters. Inside, semi-tropical flora, no fauna, monitors throughout. Life-maintenance machinery to be concentrated by the east wall within a circle of trees, including the input screen. All instructional programs to feature

only cartoon characters in biohazard suits, to minimize curiosity about other people."

Katherine said, "Two-and-a-half acres isn't sufficient for a self-sustaining biosphere."

"Of course not, ma'am," the high-clearance DOD engineer said, barely concealing his impatience. "An outside computer will control all plant-maintenance and atmospheric functions."

"And personnel?"

"Once the biosphere is up and running, it will need little human oversight. Both functional and contact personnel will be your agency's responsibility. Our involvement extends only to the construction and maintenance of the cage."

"Don't call it that!"

The engineer, whom Katherine knew she should be thanking instead of reprimanding, merely shrugged. His blue eyes glittered with dislike. "Whatever you say, ma'am."

Three days later, Taney didn't come.

It was her day. But lunch came up on the feeder, and then dinner, and then the sky got dark, and the leaving door never opened. Kim sat staring at it the whole day, her mouth hanging open until Jana pressed it closed. Kim couldn't talk or do much of anything, but somehow she always knew when it was Taney's day. So she sat, while the others splashed in the pond and pretended to have fun.

All at once the water in the pond gave a small hiccup and sloshed gently onto the sandy beach.

"Did you feel that?" Sudie said. "The ground moved!"

"Ground can't move," Li said, because he was the leader. But it had. He waited for the ground to do something else but it just lay there, ground under water. Li got out of the pond.

"Where are you going?" Jana said.

"Feeder time," Li said, although it wasn't.

They pulled Kim to her feet and ran. By the time they reached the Grove, their naked bodies were dry. Li could feel his hair, which Taney sometimes cut, curling wetly on the back of his neck. Jana's hair, shorter than his, stood up in yellow fluff that Li liked. Maybe Jana would want to play bodies with him tonight.

They sat in a circle under the trees, hungry and pleasantly tired from splashing in the pond. Sudie studied the keypad under the screen, each button with a little picture on it, and chose the cartoon about four children helping each other to make sand paintings. Li was tired of that cartoon, although when it first appeared, they'd all loved it. Days and days had been spent making sand paintings with the many-colored sands on the beach by the pond.

The cartoon played, but only Kim really watched it. The feeder rose and—

"The bowls are empty!" Jana cried.

Li leaped up and examined the four wooden bowls. *Empty*. How could that be? Why would the feeder bring empty bowls?

The ground moved gently beneath them.

"The feeder is broken!" Sudie jumped up and ran to the keypad. Each of its buttons had a picture of a cartoon showing the right thing to do for eating, for playing, for cleaning themselves, for fixing bloody scratches if they fell, for not using up all their kindness if they got angry with each other. But nothing for a broken feeder, a thing that couldn't happen because the feeder was part of the world. But if there was an inside to the covering that was the world and therefore an outside then maybe—Li had never thought this before—maybe the feeder, like Taney, went outside and things *could* break there?

Cold slid along Li's neck. Kim started licking everyone's face, running from one to another. Li let her because Kim was stronger than he was and anyway he was used to it.

"I'm calling Taney," Sudie said, but she looked questioningly at Li. Calling Taney was, they had all been told over and over, very serious. The only times they'd ever called her was when Sudie broke her arm and when Jana ate the bad flower and all her food came back up through her mouth. Only twice.

"Do it," Li said, and Sudie pushed at the exact same time both buttons with Taney's picture.

Katherine sat very erect, the back of her best suit not touching the back of her chair, her face stone. A secret congressional hearing didn't scare her, veteran of far too many. But what this particular committee might decide, did.

"Dr. Taney, are they, in your expert opinion, the result of deliberate genetic experimentation?"

"Of course they are, Mr. Chairman."

"And intended by the enemy for use as a covert terrorist weapon against the United States?"

"The enemy does not inform me of its intentions."

"But if released, these things—"

"Children, Senator. And no one is suggesting releasing them."

"But—"

"They are children. Have you even seen them?" Katherine pressed the button on her purse. Equipment she should not have been able to get into the committee room suddenly flashed an image on the far wall. Four babies, three of them beautiful with skin pink or brown or golden, one with a shock of thick black hair and eyes already the color of coffee beans. They could have posed for a diversity poster. Smiling, plump-armed, adorable.

Lethal.

Li hadn't expected Taney to come right away, maybe not until morning. He couldn't sleep. He didn't want to play bodies with Jana or Sudie. All night, it seemed, he lay in his blanket, listening to Kim breathe heavily beside him, her mouth open. And in the morning, the world broke.

It began with a big shake of the ground, much harder than yesterday, that would have knocked them all down if anyone had been standing. Next came a terrible grinding noise like scraping rocks together but so

loud that Kim clapped her hands over her ears. Sudie screamed. Then the ground shook even more, and the sky cracked, and pieces fell down on Li.

He rolled over and shut his eyes tight. The noise went on and on. A tree fell over—he knew it was a tree even without looking, and that made him jump up and shout, “Get away from the Grove! Go! Go!”

No one moved. Another tree toppled and something went bang!

All at once, it was over.

Kim began licking Li’s face, then Jana’s. Sudie still screamed. Jana cried, “Stop that!” and hit her. Sudie stopped. Kim did not; she licked Sudie’s face until Sudie shoved her away.

Silence.

“Children,” Katherine said into the silence. “And I have more pictures. So do others, who know these babies’ stories.”

The chairman leaned forward, his face colder than the medals on the chest of the general beside him. “Dr. Taney, are you saying you have breached national security by leaking this information to others? And further, that you are attempting to blackmail—”

“I attempt nothing, Mr. Chairman. I don’t have to. Secrets extend only so far, even secret terrorist weapons. Which these children are, in a long and shameful tradition. Children have been used to blow up American soldiers—and themselves—on four continents, to smuggle poisons into military camps, to deliver biological bombs. We all know that. Right now your impulse is to destroy these children as soon as researchers have taken enough blood and tissue samples. You want to destroy them partly because they are truly dangerous and partly to avoid widespread panic. With the war so recently ended, you don’t want the populace to know what the enemy was—and may still be—capable of, both technically and morally. That’s understandable. But—”

Katherine leaned forward, her gaze locked with the chairman’s. “But I am telling you, Senator Blaine, that your information chain is not secure, and that if you destroy these children—these innocent and very photogenic babies—that fact will become known. This administration—and your political party—has worked very hard to position themselves as the new world force that acts compassionately, that does the right thing. You’ve had a hard row to hoe in that regard, given your predecessors’ actions on the world stage. Do you really want to undo all that careful positioning by destroying four innocent children?”

The senator said angrily, “This is not a partisan—”

“Of course not,” Katherine said wearily. “But you’ve already commissioned a feasibility study for a self-contained and completely secure dome to—”

“How do you know that, madame? How?”

She just stared at him. Then she said, in a different voice, “I was with the original team that extracted the children from behind enemy lines, and I just told you that your information chain is not secure. How would I not know?”

“Senator—grow up.”

* * *

Cautiously Li stamped one bare foot on the ground. It didn't move. He said, startled to hear his own voice so high, so squeaky, "Is anybody hurt?"

"No," Jana said. Sudie said, "Find the cartoon about the right thing to do if the world breaks."

"There's no cartoon for that," Jana said. She looked at Li. "What should we do?"

"I don't know," Li said, because he didn't. How could the *world* break?

"Let's go to the leaving door," Jana said. "Maybe Taney will come."

They wound their way to the far end of the world, Jana in the lead, Li lagging behind to look at everything. Trees fallen to the ground or leaning over. Big pieces of the sky on the ground—what if one of those had fallen on the Grove? And then, almost to the pond and the leaving door—

"Stop," Li said, and looked, and couldn't stop looking.

Sudie breathed, "What is it?"

Li took a long time to find the right words. "It's a crack in the world."

A narrow jagged break, just like when he cracked a stick on a hard stone. The break started at the ground and he could follow it with his eyes up the sky to a place where pieces of sky had fallen, making a white pile. Jana started toward the crack, stopped, started again. Li followed her. After a moment Kim darted after them both, frantically trying to lick their faces.

"Not now, Kim!" Li snapped. He stood beside Jana at the crack and they both peered through.

"What is it, Li?" Jana whispered.

"It's . . . it's another world. Where Taney goes when she leaves us."

Jana turned her thin body sideways and squeezed through. Li said, "No! You don't—"

"We need to find Taney, don't we?" Jana said.

Li didn't know. He didn't know anything any more. The world on the other side of the crack looked so different. . . . All at once he wanted to see more of it, see it all. He turned sideways and pushed himself through, scraping skin off his shoulders. Immediately Sudie and Kim began to howl.

"Stop that!" Jana said. "We're going to find Taney! Sudie, push Kim through."

Kim was the biggest but very strong and flexible; she wiggled herself through easily. Once out, she just stared from the tiny eyes in her broad, flat face. She didn't even try to lick anybody. For once Li knew how Kim felt. He had walked a few steps away from the old world and he couldn't stop staring.

Rocky, wrinkled ground stretched away on all sides—so much ground! Li's stomach flopped; this world was so *big*. But empty. He saw no palms, no bushes, no flowers, nothing but ground that was red and white and brown, endless ground, and far, far away the ground rose up high, blue with white on top, and above that—

The sky of this world was blue, not white, and it went on forever. Forever, so high above that Li's head wrinkled inside just like the ground. All this . . . and Taney had never told them. Why not?

"Li, Sudie won't fit," Jana said. "She's too fat for the break in the world."

Sudie had reached one arm through the crack and was frantically waving it and howling. Li wanted her to shut up; he wanted to go on looking and looking. The endless ground was covered with rocks, hundreds of rocks; for the first time, Li understood what the numbers cartoon meant by "hundreds." Rocks red and white and gray and black, all sizes and shapes, some tiny as a thumb and some bigger than Li, some—

"Li, she won't *fit*," Jana said. Sudie howled louder. Jana said, "Oh, be quiet, Sudie, we're not going to leave you. Li?"

"Tell her to go roll in the mud by the pond and get all wet and slippery."

Sudie did, and eventually they pulled her through, although not without making blood come out on her arms and shoulders and hips. Sudie didn't seem to mind the blood. But she took one look at the new world and promptly began howling again, plopping down onto the ground and covering her head with her bloody arms.

Something very bright came into the new sky over the top of the old world. Li tried to look at it and couldn't; it hurt his eyes too much. Fear filled him.

Jana gasped, "What's that? Sudie, shut up!" Kim began licking all their faces.

The bright thing didn't seem to be falling on them. Li said, "I think . . . I think it's morning."

"That's silly," Jana said. "Morning comes all over the whole sky at the same time."

"Not in this world," Li said. He felt a little dizzy, as if he'd been playing the spinning game. "Jana, this place is so *big*."

"Then how are we going to find Taney? I think we should walk on the path." She pointed.

Li had to turn his back on the morning and squint before he could see what she pointed at. A faint path, no more than a pressing down of rocks, led away from the real world. Closest to him, it had a broken pattern of triangles in the dust.

"Come on, Sudie," Jana said. "Get up. We're going to find Taney. Li, follow me and she'll come, too."

Li followed Jana, who didn't look around but just walked fast on her thin, long legs. Sudie and Kim stumbled after them, Sudie complaining that all the stones on the ground hurt her feet. Jana seemed to have become the leader now, but Li didn't care about that, or his feet. All he wanted to do was look and look.

Rocks, growing redder as the morning rose in the sky. The morning looked like a rock, too, brighter and brighter, so that looking at it for even a second hurt Li's eyes. And there, on that flat rock . . .

Sudie started to scream again. Jana, who had used up all her kindness, hit her. The thing on the rock scurried away, underneath more stones. Li said, "Don't hit Sudie, Jana!" at the same minute that Jana said, "I'm sorry. She won't—what was that, Li?"

"It was alive, I think," Li said uncertainly. "Like birds."

"Then why didn't it fly away?"

"I don't know." He had never seen anything alive except themselves, Taney, and the birds in the old world. A memory came, himself asking

Taney, *"What do the birds eat?"* *"The world gives them food high up on the sky,"* she'd answered, *"just like the feeder gives you food. The world keeps you both safe."*

They weren't in that world anymore. Li said, "Watch out for other living things. Don't step on any because you might hurt them. You might even make them dead." They had all seen dead birds in the real world. Taney always took the bodies away with her.

They walked for a long time. The morning rock in the sky got brighter still. Something was wrong with the air; it got way too hot. Li was very thirsty but there was nothing to drink. They walked silently, even Sudie, and Li began to feel very afraid. The hard-to-see path didn't seem to go anywhere. Why would there be a path that didn't go anywhere? What if they couldn't find Taney?

"Look," Sudie said as they trudged over a low rise, "a big path!"

She was right, but this path was different: very wide and very straight and very hot. Putting a foot on the black stone, Li yelped and immediately pulled it back. But immediately he forgot about the pain. Something was coming very fast along the path.

Sudie screamed until Jana raised her hand and Sudie stopped. Li could feel Jana tremble beside him. All four children huddled into a knot. The thing made a lot of noise, growing bigger and bigger until it stopped with the loudest noise yet and a person jumped out.

A person who was not Taney, and not in a slippery white covering or a faceplate. Again Li's mind wrinkled and dizzied. Even Sudie was too scared to make noise. The only one who moved was Kim, licking everyone's faces.

"Oh my God, you kids caught in the earthquake? What in hell happened to you? Jack, one of 'em's bleeding!"

Another person got out of the moving thing. Now Li could see that the thing wasn't alive, like the not-bird had been, but it still made puffing noises. The second person had a lot of hair growing on his face, which looked silly and scary. But his voice was kind. "Where's your folks? And your clothes? Sally, they look damn near dehydrated. Get the water. Kids, what happened?"

Jana said, "We have to find Taney."

"Taney? Is that a town?"

Jana said, Li wondering at her bravery, "Taney's a person. The world broke and before that the feeders didn't give us any food and we have to find Taney!"

The person with the hair on his face looked away from Jana. His face above the hair looked very red. The other person came hurrying toward them with a white thing in her hand. "Here, drink first. Jack, go get some sheets or something from the trunk. Poor kids must have been asleep when the quake hit, you know these hippie tourists just let their kids sleep buck naked, it's a disgrace but even so—"

Li stopped listening to her words, which after all didn't even make sense. The white thing was sort of like a food bowl closed at the top and sort of like the spring faucet in the real world, giving out water. Li passed it first to Kim, as always, who drank greedily, the water dribbling down

her chest. Then Jana, then Sudie, and by the time it got to Li, he felt he couldn't wait another moment. Nothing had ever tasted as good as that water, nothing.

The person called Sally handed a big thin blanket to Jana, who let it drop to the ground. "Put it on you, for God's sake," Sally said, and the kindness in her voice was getting used up.

Jack still not looking at them, said, "Sal, I think maybe they're in shock. Or maybe a little feeble-minded."

"Oh!" Sally said, and she looked at Kim, still trying to lick Sudie's face. "Oh, of course, poor things. Here, honey, let me help you." She picked up the blanket, tore it in half, and began to wrap Jana in it.

Jana pushed away. "It's not time to sleep!"

"Jana, let her," Li said. He didn't know what these people were doing, but the kindness had come back into Sally's voice, and they were going to need kindness, Li realized, to find Taney. This place was much different from the real world. Brighter and harder and hungrier and bigger.

From the corner of his eye he saw another of the not-birds watching him, stretched out on a flat gray rock. Its eyes were shiny and black as pebbles.

Sally tied blanket pieces around all of them and said, very slowly, "Now get out of this sun and into the car before you all broil. Honey, you're burning already, and bleeding, too. You get hit by debris in the quake?"

She was looking at Sudie, but Li answered. "She got scraped by the crack in the world."

"I knew it. Get in, get in!"

The "car" was just another covering, made of the same material as the place the sky met the ground in the real world. Inside the car, however, the air was more like the real world: cooler and not so bright. The four of them squeezed into a space in the back, and Sally and Jack climbed into the front space. Sally turned around.

"Now what all are your names?" She still spoke very slowly, making each word with her lips all pushed out.

Li said, "I'm Li. This is Jana and Sudie and Kim."

"Good," Sally said, smiling wide as a cartoon person. "Now tell Aunt Sally what happened. How you got all alone out on the desert."

Li said, "The ground shook last night and then this morning the world broke. We squeezed out through a crack in the sky and walked. We have to find Taney."

"Is Taney a town, son?" Jack said.

Li didn't know what a town was. "Taney's a person. She takes care of us."

"A foster mother?" Sally said.

Jack said, "I don't think a foster mother could handle four retards, Sal. More likely some sort of institution. Might be in East Lancaster."

"Doubt it," Sally said. "East Lancaster got hit pretty hard by the depression, only been minimal facilities there for fifteen years, and now with the quake and all. . . ."

"Well, them kids didn't walk very far buck-naked in the desert," Jack said. Li could hear that the kindness was getting used up in his voice.

"Somebody must of took them camping or something. But I can't go rack-eting around looking for some institution when we need to see how badly our place got hit. Best bring them home with us tonight and check the Internet for this 'Taney.'"

"Right," Sally said. "Kids, don't worry, everything'll be all right."

Jack snorted.

The covering round them leapt forward and Sudie screamed. Jana pinched her hard and Sudie stopped, although she didn't look any less terrified. Kim began licking Sudie's face. Sally watched a minute and then turned away, the tips of her mouth turning down. Li didn't want Sally's kindness to get used up again. He leaned forward.

"Sally, thank you so much for the water. It was very good."

"Oh, God, you're welcome," Sally said.

"My name is Li. Not God."

Jack laughed. "He's not so dumb after all!"

The "car" walked a long way, and everywhere on the long way looked the same. Li watched everything, inside and outside the car, until despite himself, he fell asleep. He woke up when the car stopped at a big square thing which, Li realized when they went inside it, was another world, with its own ground and sky. How many worlds were there?

"Still standing, by the grace of God," Sally said. "We're damn lucky. Jack, you get on that computer and start searching. Li, what did you say your last name was?"

"My name is Li."

"No, honey, your *other* name."

Li just stared. He had no other name. Jack sighed and went around a part of this world's sky. The place the children stood in was cool and dim, with large, funny-shaped rocks covered in blankets to sit on, and a feeder. The children crowded near it, waiting.

"Y'all are hungry, right?" Sally said. "Can't say as I blame you. Well, go ahead sit at the table and I'll rustle up something. A lot of smashed crock-ery in the kitchen, but that can wait."

This feeder was broken, too; no bowls rose from it. But apparently Sally had saved food from before it broke because she brought out big bowls. The food looked strange but tasted wonderful, and Li ate until his belly felt full and round. Afterward sleepiness took him again, and he stretched out on the floor beside Jana, who was making strange sounds in her throat.

"You got allergies, hon?" Sally said. "Never mind, I don't expect you to know. Jack, you making any progress in there?"

"Just over a million hits on 'Taney,' is all," Jack said, which made no sense. Nobody was hitting anybody. "This ain't going to be easy."

Li's throat felt strange, and not in a good way. Jana kept making strange noises in her throat. Li must have slept, because when he woke it was night again, and very dark. Something glowed in a far corner of the room, and at first that scared Li. He lay on the ground, watching to see if the glowing thing moved. It didn't. Slowly he crawled toward it, until he could see that it was a tiny ball of morning, like the big one in the sky of

the big world, but not so bright. Li touched it, and snatched back his finger. The tiny morning was hot.

Carefully he studied it. It was a made thing, like the pretty folded things Jana made from Taney's paper bags. Li's breath came faster. All these things were made: the feeder and the bowls and the blanket-covered rocks—"chairs" Sally had called them—to sit on, and maybe even the sky of this world.

Of any world.

Li's mind raced. He never got back to sleep. All the rest of the night he either crawled around, touching things and trying to figure out how they'd been made, or else lay still, thinking. His throat still hurt but he ignored it. *Made things*. Other people. Worlds within worlds.

When morning—the big morning—returned, the girls still lay sleeping on the ground. All of them breathed too heavily. Li stood, stretched, and went to look around the parts of sky that touched the ground for Jack and Sally.

Jack sat slumped over a small screen, which still glowed. Sally lay on the floor. Both of them were dead.

Not here.

Katherine made another, equally futile tour of the biosphere, stumping heavily, leaning on her cane. She'd fallen two days ago, twisting her knee, which had led her to put off her visit to the children. Then had come the first quake, which had made her fall again as she hobbled across her living room. No one had predicted the second, massive quake.

She called again, knowing it was pointless. She'd seen the blood on the crack in the supposedly shatter-proof dome. The children had squeezed themselves through and set off, probably looking for her. They wouldn't get far, naked in the desert, without water. There was, by design, nothing within fifty miles of the biosphere. Scavengers, of air or ground, would get the bodies.

Tears welled in her eyes, behind the faceplate. *Stupid*. This was one solution, maybe the only solution, to a problem that could only grow as years passed. Katherine was nearly seventy—what would have happened after she could no longer carry on this long, painful fight? Some days she felt ninety. Some days she felt already dead, even as the world slowly revived itself from the bad years of the war.

Li, with his dark expressive eyes and quick mind . . . delicate Jana, who in another world would have been a startling beauty . . . funny emotional Sudie . . . even Kim, afflicted with both Down's and autism . . . even Kim she would miss. Her children. She'd had no other.

Katherine put herself through detox, leaving her biohazard suit behind, even as she doubted that detox was any longer necessary. She hobbled toward her car. The AC felt blessedly cool. Fifty miles to the village of Las Verdes, where a group of Native American descendents eked out a subsistence existence, survivors of past injustices just as the children had been of a future one. A mile outside Las Verdes, Katherine had built a house, which was now a pile of debris. The Indians would rebuild it for her; they were good at starting over. Although now there was no reason for her to stay.

Li. Jana. Sudie. Kim.

She drove home through a desert wavery with heat and tears.

"Why don't the buttons have cartoon pictures on them?" Jana said.

"It isn't for cartoons," Li said slowly. They stood around the little screen where Jack had died. Li and Sudie had pulled him off the chair and laid him on the floor beside Sally, and Jana had covered the people with a blanket. Li didn't know why she'd done that, but it seemed a good thing to do.

The children had examined this world. It had four places, two with faucet springs. In those two places a lot of things were broken, and sharp pieces of clear sky had fallen down. Jana cut her foot on one piece, but it only bled a little. One of the places had more of the strange food, but not very much of it. They'd eaten it all.

"If the screen isn't for cartoons, what is it for?" Sudie said. She stood behind Li, breathing heavily into his neck, and her voice sounded . . . thick, somehow. Like food was stuck in her throat, although she said it wasn't.

"I don't know what it's for," Li said. "But we can't take it with us because it's tied to where this sky touches the ground."

"Take it with us? Where are we going?" Sudie sounded frightened and Kim began to lick her face.

Jana said, "We can't just walk like yesterday, Li."

"We're not going to walk. I watched Jack make the car go. I think I can do that."

"But where?"

"We'll go along the big path. There's no more food here, Jana. Maybe the path will take us to Taney."

Jana considered. "Okay. You're right, we can't stay here. We have to find Taney. But first fill those white bowls with water from the faucet spring."

They went out the leaving door and climbed into the car, lugging blankets and water. Sudie had untied the blanket from her body, but Li made her put it back on. "People here are different," he said. "They use up their kindness faster if you don't have blankets around you. Oh—wait!"

He went back inside and brought out a big armful of the blankets behind another leaving door in the biggest place. They were like the blankets around Jack and Sally, all shaped like bodies and fastened together with tiny little strings or hard bumps that Li had examined in great detail. "Put these coverings on you," he told the girls.

"Like Taney has," Sudie said happily, even though none of Jack's and Sally's coverings were slippery like Taney's. But some were white, and Sudie picked one of those.

Li turned the thing that Jack had turned to make the car go, and it started making noises. But it wouldn't go forward until he pushed down with his feet on the flat things on the car's ground. Then the car stopped.

"It's dead," Sudie said.

Li made it start again, and pushed the flat things. The car stopped. "Maybe I should just push one."

The car raced away so fast that Sudie screamed, even Jana gasped, and Kim started licking everyone frantically. Li pushed on the other flat thing and the car stopped.

Eventually he figured out how to make it go-stop-go-stop-go-stop, and they started down the wide dusty path, under the hot ball of morning high in the sky, to look for Taney.

“—eight point one on the Richter scale, slightly higher than the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The president has declared southern California a federal disaster area, and the Department of Domestic Rescue is mobilizing to—” Katherine turned off the car radio.

She drove past the village. Las Verdes—a bitter joke of a name, if there ever was one—had gotten off fairly lightly because when all buildings were one-story adobe brick, collapse was quick and clean. No fires, no burst gas mains, no floods. The underground spring, the only reason this village existed at all, was still there, although the well-house had crumbled. The windmills and lone cell tower lay on their sides; TV satellite dishes littered the rubble; somewhere a woman wailed, a high keening borne on the thin wind.

Katherine’s house was a pile of dirt, but the shed in the back yard still stood. Under its deceptive façade of cheap plastic was a reinforced steel frame, thief-proof and, unlike the biosphere dome, far too small to crack. She let herself inside with the key around her neck. A generator-powered computer running encrypted, military-grade software sat on a table that nearly filled the small space. It had a direct uplink to a military satellite.

TOP SECRET

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CASE NO. 254987-A

CODE NAME: ACHILLES

DATE: 6/12/28

AGENT IN CHARGE: SIGMA INVESTIGATOR K.M. TANEY

SUBJECT: DEATH OF GM JUVENILE AGENTS

She typed swiftly, sent the report, and turned off the computer. With a second key, Katherine turned a small lock set into the machine’s side. She closed the door, hobbled back to the car, and drove several hundred feet away. Five minutes later, the shed exploded.

Now there was nothing to keep her here at all.

Nonetheless, she drove toward Las Verdes. The village had regarded Katherine with neither kindness nor suspicion. Mostly it had let her be: one more crazy white inexplicably in love with the inhospitable desert, wasting her time making bad paintings of rocks and sunsets, supported by means beyond their world. Still, the trunk of her car held medical supplies, among other things; perhaps she could help.

The car stopped going and Li couldn’t make it start again no matter what he did. “Is it broken?” Sudie said. “Like the feeder and the world?”

“Yes,” Li said. He opened the door; it was getting very hot inside. It was hot outside, too. The four children got out and sat in the brief shade on one side of the dead car, trying to not touch its burning side.

Jana started to say something, stopped, took Li's hand.

He gazed out across the big world, glanced briefly at the hot ball of morning in the big sky, and anger grew in him. All this—all this had been out here all the time, and Taney had never let them have it. All this, and now that they had found it, they were going to die here. Li knew it, and he guessed that Jana knew it, too. Sudie and Kim did not. But Kim might have known something, deep in her different head, because she crawled over Sudie and began to lick Li's face.

He pushed her away and dropped Jana's hand. His kindness, he knew, was all used up. He didn't want to die.

"I'm so thirsty," Sudie said. No one answered.

A long time later Sudie said, "Look at those big birds up there. Flying around and around in circles. Why are they doing that, Li?"

"I don't know," Li said.

Jana said, "Something is coming on the big path. There." She pointed.

Li strained his eyes. Finally he saw a sort of wiggle in the air—how could Jana see so far?—with a black dot in it. The dot got bigger and bigger and then it turned into another "car" but big, enormous, so that Sudie whimpered and tried to hide behind Li. The car stopped and a person got out.

"What the...what happened here, son?"

"This car stopped," Li said. He stood. The man didn't have hair on his face like Jack, and his voice sounded more like Taney's.

"You were driving? Where's your folks?"

Li didn't know what "folks" might be; everything in this world was so strange. He said, "We have to find Taney."

"But your parents . . . hell, get out of the sun, first. We can help you, son. We're Department of Domestic Rescue. Climb in."

Inside the big car was another little world, with chairs and blankets and a feeder. A woman gave them water and said, "Baker, where did they come from?"

Baker sat at another of the little screens and did something to it. "They said 'Taney,' but GPS isn't giving me anything like that."

"Well, we're due in Las Verdes like, *now*. Shall I drive? And while you're on-line, is there any more email on why we're being diverted to an ass-end hole like Las Verdes when real population centers are screaming for help?"

"No. Presumably Las Verdes has an emergency situation."

"Two states have an emergency situation, Baker. Why the priority-one diversion to Las Verdes?"

"Ann, ours is not to reason why—"

"Oh, roast it. I'll drive."

Baker gave them all food, and Li fell asleep on the moving ground of the car. When he woke, Baker and Ann were leaving the big car. "You stay here, Li," Baker said. "Safest and coolest inside, and we've got work to do. We'll get you sorted out tonight, I promise. Okay, buddy?"

There was kindness in Baker's voice, so Li said, "Yes."

"You could maybe . . . I know! Here."

Baker did something to the car's sky, and all at once a screen came

down, glowed, and made *cartoons*. Sudie squealed with joy. A cartoon bird—how could cartoons have birds, not just people?—flew toward the hot ball of morning in the sky, chased by a person. Sudie, Kim, and Jana crowded close.

Li watched through the clear place in the car's sky as Baker and Ann walked toward piles of dirt and crying people. He watched for a long time. The hot ball of morning sunk down into the ground (how did it do that?) and the sky turned wonderful colors, purple and red and yellow. Baker and Ann came in and out, carrying things out with them. On one coming in, Ann touched a place on the wall and morning came inside the car's world, although not in the big world outside. The girls watched the cartoons, too absorbed to even laugh. Li looked outside.

Figures moved in and out of houses made of blankets, some of which Ann had folded. Little bits of morning lighted the blanket houses. And by that light, as he peered out of the car with his nose pushed flat against it, Li saw her.

"Taney!"

Her back ached. She had moved too much, lifted too much, grown too old for this sort of field work. For any sort of field work. But everything was done that could be done tonight. Under the capable direction of the DDR agents, Ann Lioni and Baker Tully, the wounded had been treated, the homeless housed in evac inflatables, the spring water tested and found safe. Everyone had been fed. Tomorrow the dead would be buried. Katherine looked up and saw a ghost at the window of the DDR mobile.

No. Not possible.

But there he was.

Li waved his arms and Katherine, dazed, half lifted her hand before she let it drop. *How . . .* But it didn't matter how. What mattered was that Lioni and Tully, that everyone here, that Katherine herself, were already dead.

The leaving door wouldn't open. It wouldn't *open*, no matter how Li pushed it. He cried out in frustration and shoved Sudie, who was making everything harder by pushing the door in a different direction from Li. But then he got the door open and tumbled down the square rocks made of sky material and he was with Taney, throwing his arms around her waist, Sudie and Jana and Kim right behind him. Kim started licking Taney's face, jumping up in mute excitement.

"Taney! Taney!"

"You found us!"

"You lost your covering! I can touch you!"

"Taney, the world broke and we came out! It broke!"

"Taney! Taney!"

"You know these kids?" Baker said behind Taney. She turned, Li and Sudie still clinging to her, and Baker said in a different voice, "Doctor—what is it?"

"We . . . they . . . Kim, *stop!*"

They had never heard that voice from her before. Li, startled, stepped

back. But then Taney's kindness was back, although she sounded very sad.

"Li, take the others back inside the trailer. I promise I'll come in just a little while, okay? Just everybody go inside."

They went, of course; this was *Taney*. Jana and Li stared at each other. Sudie went back to watching the cartoons still showing on the screen. Kim pressed her nose against the clear sky-metal to watch Taney, mutely following her every tiny movement in the gathering dark. Li joined Kim.

A woman ran up to Taney and Baker, waving her arms and shouting.

"Experiments?" Baker Tully said, bewildered and angry and, Katherine could see, terrified. As well he should be. "Bioweaponry experiments?"

"From the very end of the war," Katherine said. "Intelligence discovered the operation and we sent in two entire battle groups five days before the surrender."

"And Ann—" He couldn't say it. It had been hard to pull him away from Ann Lioni's body, lying crumpled between a DDR inflatable and the ruins of an adobe house. Beside her, incongruously, lay an unbroken planter filled with carefully watered dahlias. Now Katherine and Baker stood behind the huge mobile, away from the others. She looked at his young, suddenly ravaged face, dimly lit by a rising gibbous moon, and she thought, *I can't do this*.

He had courage. He got out, "How long? For me, I mean?"

"I don't know for sure. The only tests we could run, obviously, were on animals. When did you and Ann first pick up the children?"

"About six hours ago. Give it to me straight, doctor. *Please*. I have to know."

She saw what he was doing: looking desperately for a way out. All his training, like hers, had taught him that the way out of anything was information, knowledge, reasoning. But not this time.

I can't do this.

She said, "I have to sit down, I'm sorry . . . knee injury." She eased herself onto the ground, partly cutting off the illumination from the flood-lamps, so that they sat in shadowed darkness. That should have made it easier, but didn't.

"A virus in their breath gets into the bloodstream from the victim's lungs and makes a targeted, cytopathic toxin. When the virus has replicated enough for the toxin to reach a critical level, it stops the heart. And the virus is highly contagious, passed from person to person."

"So everyone here—"

"Yes," Katherine said quietly.

"I don't understand!" All at once he sounded like a child, like Li. Simultaneously Katherine shuddered and put a hand on his arm. Baker shook it off. "I just don't understand. If that's all true, the virus would spread through the whole country, killing everybody—"

"The—"

"—and then the whole world! The enemy would have killed themselves, too!"

"No," Katherine said. Her knee began to throb painfully. "There are

racial differences among genomes. Small differences, and not very many, but enough. Think of genetic diseases: Tay-Sachs among Jews, sickle-cell anemia among Blacks. We've found more, and much more subtle. This virus exploits a tiny difference in genetic structure, and so in cellular functioning, in anyone with certain Caucasian-heritage genes. Tully—"

"The Indians here . . ."

She peered at his face, shrouded in night, and loved him. She had just told him he was going to die, and he had a soul generous enough to think of others. She started to say, "Depends on whether any of their ancestors intermarried with—" when his rage overcame his generosity.

"You're a fucking geneticist! You and the entire United States government couldn't come up with an antidote or vaccine or something!"

"No. Do you think we didn't try?"

"Why didn't you kill them all as soon as you found them?"

Katherine didn't answer. Either he hadn't meant the question, or he had. If it had been just more terrified rage, she certainly didn't blame him. If he meant it, nothing she could say would make it clear to him.

He said bitterly, "There were political considerations, right? Ten years ago it was fucking President DuBois, working so hard to undo the wrongs of the previous screw-ups, ending the war with compassion, re-establishing our fucking position as the so-called moral leader of the world, and so now Ann is dead and I have to. . . ." Abruptly his anger ran out.

She waited a long moment and then uttered what she knew to be, the moment she said it, the stupidest, most futile statement of her entire life. "I'm sorry."

He didn't hear it. She sat dreading his reply, and it was a full minute, more, before she realized there wouldn't ever be one. Baker Tully still sat with his head thrown back in fury and anguish against the mobile's rear wheel, but when she felt for his wrist, there was no pulse.

Six hours, then, from the time of initial exposure.

He was too heavy for her to move, but nobody would find him there before morning. She returned to the tent where the villagers had laid Ann Lioni's body and told everyone that Baker was mourning alone, in the trailer. Katherine checked on the patients in the medical tent, issued instructions, and drank coffee to stay awake for the few hours until everyone else slept. Then she removed the distributor caps from the three working vehicles in the small camp and carried them with her inside the DDR mobile, where the children waited.

"Why doesn't she come? Why doesn't she come? Why doesn't she come?" Sudie made the words into a song, and it made Li's face itch. But he didn't let his kindness get used up. Maybe the song helped Sudie wait.

Eventually, however, she fell asleep, and so did Kim. Jana and Li waited. In the light from the car's sky, Jana's hair looked yellow as the big morning. She smelled bad because none of them had splashed in a pool since the first world broke, but Li put his arms around her anyway, just to feel her warmth.

Finally—finally!—the door opened and Taney came in. This time Li really looked at her, at Taney without her covering. Her face was wrinkled.

Her eyes sagged. She walked as if something was broken, pulling herself up the square sky-metal rocks by holding onto the edge of the leaving door. Slowly she sat on a chair. Li's heart filled with love.

"Taney," Jana said softly, breaking free of Li's arms and climbing onto Taney's lap. "I knew we'd find you."

"No, you didn't," Li said. He sat on the ground at Taney's feet. "Taney, I have a lot of questions."

"I'm sure you have, dear heart," Taney said, and there was something wrong with her voice. "So do I. Let me ask mine first."

So Li and Jana told her about the break in the world, and Jack and Sally, and sitting beside the broken car on the wide hot path when Ann and Baker came along. Sudie snored and Kim whuffled in her sleep.

"Taney, why were we in that world and not this one?" Li said.

"Tell you what, I'll answer all your questions in the morning," Taney said. "I'm very tired right now and so are you. Look, Jana's almost asleep! You lie down here and sleep. I'm going to see about the other people once more."

"Okay," Li said, because he *was* sleepy.

Taney kissed them all, covered them with blankets, and left. Li heard the leaving door make a noise behind her.

A voice in Katherine's head said, *Even the most passionate minds are capable of trivial thoughts during tragedy.*

Standing there in the dark, it took her a long moment to identify the speaker: Some professor back in college, droning on about some Shakespearean play. Why had that random memory come to her now? She even recalled the next thing he said: that only third-rate dramatists put children in peril to create emotion, which was one reason Shakespeare was infinitely superior to Thomas Hardy.

That professor had been an ass. Children were always the first ones put in peril by upheavals in the world. But not like this . . . not like this.

She unscrewed the gas cap of the DDR mobile and drew the lighter from her pocket. Used for starting campfires at the center of the kindling, it could flick out a long projection that generated a shower of sparks. The village's distributor caps were inside the mobile. Baker's body lay beside it. Everybody else, marooned here, would be dead by morning, except those with no European ancestry in their genes. And although she'd spent the ten years in Las Verdes mostly keeping to herself, Katherine was pretty sure no such Indians existed in the small village. If they did, they might conceivably be turned into carriers, like Li and Jana and Kim and Sudie, but Katherine didn't think so. The children had been designed to be carriers. Their genomes showed many little-understood variations. The enemy, free from laws against genetic experimentation, had done so with a vengeance.

When all hosts died, so did their viruses.

She clicked the lighter and the projection snaked out, already glowing. Her hand moved toward the fuel tank, then drew back.

I can't.

But what were the alternatives? Let the children, locked inside, die of

starvation. Or, either if they were picked up by other people or if Li somehow learned to drive the mobile as he had Jack's car, to let them infect more people, who would infect still others, until the air-borne virus with a 100 percent kill rate had, at a minimum, wiped out two continents. Who in hell could decide among those three choices?

Katherine had fought for these children's lives, had tended them for ten years, had loved them as her own. What mother would choose the deaths of her children over the fate of the world?

What rational human being would not?

Hail Mary, Mother of God. . . . More useless words, rising out of her distant past like subterranean rocks in an earthquake. Her hand again moved toward the fuel tank, again drew back.

She couldn't do it. It was physically impossible, like suddenly flying up into the air. And in less than a few hours she, too, would be dead, and none of this would matter to her any longer. That, too, was a choice: to do nothing.

From beyond the ruined village came wailing, many voices at once. So everyone hadn't gone to sleep, after all. The Indians were holding a ritual mourning for the three dead in the quake. Sudden light flared in the darkness: a bonfire.

Katherine clicked off the lighter and sank hopelessly to the ground. In a moment she would do it, in just another moment. The explosion would be violent and instantaneous; the children would not suffer . . . in just a moment. There was no other choice. Light found its way to her eyes, and she closed them because in such a world there should not be even the flickering light of the bonfire, let alone the steady lying beauty of the silver moon in the wide desert sky.

She woke at dawn. Cold, stiff, shivering—but alive.

With enormous effort, Katherine got to her feet. Limping, she made her way to the medical tent. Everyone in it was dead. So were the villagers in the emergency inflatables, and an old man lying beside the ashes of the bonfire. Only Katherine lived.

Trembling, she hobbled back to the mobile, climbed the steps, and unlocked the door. Only Kim was awake, tearing at a loaf of bread with her small sharp teeth. She took one look at Katherine, dropped the bread, and began to lick Katherine's face. Katherine, stretched almost to breaking, started to shove Kim away . . . and stopped.

No. Not possible.

Li woke. "Taney!" he said, rubbing his dark eyes. "I was sleeping."

"Yes." It was a croak. Li noticed . . . those dark eyes, that quick little mind, missed nothing.

"You said you will answer my questions today."

"Yes." Her arms were tight around Kim, so tight the child squirmed. When had Katherine put her arms around Kim, who usually had to be shoved away? She couldn't remember, couldn't think. . . . She got out, "Li, when does Kim lick people's faces?"

"When she thinks they're sad or angry or hurt. Taney, you said it was my turn to ask questions today."

"Yes."

He crowded close to her, smelling terrible. "You said the first world was to keep us safe. But the feeder broke and we were hungry and then the first world broke, Taney, it *broke*, and all this other world was out here. Why did you say the first world would keep us safe?"

"A safeguard," Katherine said, and wasn't sure what she was saying. "Oh, the bastards—an antidotal safeguard for the first researchers. In her saliva."

"What?"

"Thousands of compounds in saliva. We couldn't possibly have tested them all."

"What—"

"Taney," Jana said sternly from the floor, "stop crying. There's nothing to cry about. We found you. . . . Stop it, please, Taney, stop it before my kindness gets all used up."

The real fight was just beginning, she knew that. It would rage on so many fronts: medical, military, political, even journalistic if they drove her to that. So much energy would be required, so much strategy. She had won ten years ago but she was older now, and much more tired.

Nonetheless, her mind was already marshalling arguments. The enemy's research division had been thoroughly destroyed, and so had its personnel. But there was no guarantee that the bombs had actually gotten them all; there had never been any guarantee. The enemy was supposedly our ally now, but if the world situation changed again . . . and things always changed. A biological antidote was the first step toward a vaccine . . . *No, Mr. President, tissue samples cannot provide the same mechanisms as a living organism. . . .*

Katherine, driving the DDR mobile across the Mojave, glanced back over her shoulder at Kim, the only ugly and unappealing child of the four. Kim, erratic about controlling her bowels, screaming like a stuck siren, forever licking the faces of people she loved. A child no one would want, a child likely to have been stuck in the back ward of some institution somewhere, while the other three babies would have been adopted, cuddled, loved. Kim, now the most important child on the planet.

"It's my turn now!" Jana said.

"In a minute," Li answered, just as the computer said, "Cat. 'Cat' starts with 'c.' Say 'kuh' for 'c.'"

"Kuh," Li and Jana said simultaneously, and the computer broke into congratulatory song. Li and Jana laughed with excitement.

Sudie suddenly appeared beside the driver's seat. "Taney," she said seriously, "Now that the real world got broke, are you going to keep us safe?"

Medical fights, military fights, political fights, journalistic fights. Katherine's knee throbbed. The desert shimmered in front of her, murderous with heat, the earthquake disaster behind. Katherine was nearly seventy years old, and her knee hurt.

"Yes, dear heart, I am," she said, and drove on across the desert, toward the next world. ○

POISON

Bruce McAllister

Golden Gryphon Press will bring out a collection of Bruce McAllister's science fiction stories entitled *The Girl Who Loved Animals and Other Stories* this fall. The author's latest tale, however, is a fantasy. This past summer, he traveled to Italy to revisit, after forty-five years, the world (village, witches, and lizards) of "Poison" and to trace the medieval itinerary of the hero of a fantasy novel—*The Dragons of Como*—that's almost finished.

In school that day the American boy, whose twelfth birthday was approaching, did just as well as his friends on the Roman history recitation and the spelling test, which included the word *stregheria*—*witchcraft*—which could, if you weren't careful, easily be confused with *straggaria*, an old-fashioned word for *respect*.

After school let out, he and his friends celebrated their good fortune by buying new plastic blowguns at the toy store in the fishing village and spending an hour making dozens of little paper cones with sewing needles taped to their points. Every boy in this country had at least one blowgun—they were cheap and no longer than a ruler—so the American boy had one too.

When the cones were finished, they went back up the hill and there, on the convent wall, not far from his family's *villetta*, hunted the lizards all boys in this country hunted. It wasn't easy hitting them. The bright green lizards weren't big and they moved like lightning, but he and his friends had gotten good at it. To keep things equal, they each stopped at six, leaving the bodies—which made the American boy sad if he looked at them too long—at the foot of the wall, where the convent cats might eat them if they were hungry enough.

The next night, after dinner, the American boy watched as his own cat—which he'd had for a year, slept with every night, and named "Nevis," the Latin word for "snow"—died in his bathtub, making little pig-like sounds until he couldn't stand it any longer and he went outside to the flagstone patio to wait in darkness for the terrible sound to stop. When it finally did, he went back in, saw a strange shadow hovering over the tub, held his breath until it was gone, and then picked his cat up. When the limp but still-warm body made him cry, he let it. His parents were next door at their landlord's, the Lupis, and wouldn't be back for a while. No

one would hear him. No one would say, as his mother sometimes did, "You're too attached to your pets, John. Even your dad thinks so."

He knew who had done it. The three witches who lived in the olive groves that covered the hills around their house always put out poison for cats. If a cat died too suddenly for a doctor to help, and in great pain, everyone knew it was poison and who had put it out. It was what witches did—poisoning animals you loved. Everyone knew this.

Hand shaking, he found a paper bag under the kitchen sink just the right size for the body, put it in gently, twisted the top, and, though it hurt him to do it, left it in the bathtub where no one would notice it during the night. It was his bathroom, and no one would look in his tub until their maid came on Monday. If his parents asked where the cat was, he'd say he didn't know; and when he was finished with what he needed to do, he'd tell them what had happened. Or at least how the cat had died, poisoned by a witch, and how he'd buried it, which would indeed be true by the time he'd finished what he needed to do.

The next morning, as he ate breakfast with his mother and father, he asked, "What do witches do on Sunday?"

"They're not witches," his mother answered. "They're just old women, John, and if they had family—if they lived in town with their families—the entire village would call them *befane*, Christmas witches, and not *streghe*, which is so unkind." His mother was a teacher and was always teaching. She was wrong—they wouldn't be called *befane*—they'd be called *nonne*—*grandmothers*—but she was frustrated that she didn't know the language well enough to teach in this country, so she was always lecturing whenever she could.

"It doesn't matter whether they're witches or not," the boy answered, and, as he did, knew that it had begun and that he could not turn back. *The truth. The courage to speak it. The anger needed for such courage.* To stand before the witch who'd done it and talk to her about what was fair and what wasn't, to make her feel what he felt. And by doing so, free himself from an anger that was like a spell, one that might hold him forever if he did not find her in the olive groves and make her see what she had done.

"You could be more sensitive about the elderly," his mother was saying. "And you don't need to speak to me or your father in that tone of voice, John."

I had no tone, he wanted to say, but knew it would only make her madder and he would have to spend the morning undoing what he had done. He had his own anger now, and anger was a powerful thing. It could make you courageous. It could make people do what you wanted. But it was also a spell—like a song you couldn't get out of your head—and could make you a slave to it. He did not want to be a slave to it, but he did have a right to be angry, didn't he? His cat had died in his bathtub making that terrible sound; and as she'd died he'd stood there, seen the shadow, and watched it happen: The soul of his cat being pulled from its dying body by the ghostly hand of an old woman, the end of her pinky finger missing.

I will know the witch by her hand, he told himself again. *By her little finger. . .*

* * *

After breakfast, he went to his bathroom, picked up the bag carefully, and headed out into the great olive grove toward the place where the trees were dead and the witches lived in their stone huts. His friends would have told him not to—that only bad would come of it, “even if you are right to be sad and angry, Gianni”—and the boy was surprised he was doing it. He was supposedly “shy,” wasn’t he? This is what people said. Why did it take the death of his cat for him to be brave? And was it really bravery? Or was it simply the need to tell the truth—to stand before the old woman who’d done it and ask her, “Why did you poison my cat?” but also to say, “I would not kill what you love, *Signora*.”

He would begin, he decided, with the first stone hut, the one closest to his family’s house on the hill. The witch who lived there would have found it easiest to poison his cat, wouldn’t she? Whether she had put the poison by her hut or in the olive trees nearer his house wouldn’t have mattered. Nevis had never gone far, so the chances she had traveled to the huts of the two witches higher up the hill made no sense. It was the closest witch who’d done it, he was sure. He had never laid eyes on her, but he had heard her in her hut when he and his friends had snuck in close one day, hiding in the little cave on the sunless side of the hill and watching from a distance, hoping to see her and yet afraid to. They never did, but they knew other boys who had.

Her teeth, a boy from the wharf had told them, were so bad you’d get nightmares if you looked at them. Yes, he’d seen her. Things were crawling in her mouth, and her tongue had made a noise like a viper’s hiss. Another boy, Carlo—one who lived near the castle that overlooked the bay—hadn’t seen her himself, but his older brothers had, years ago. They’d seen her hut turn green, tremble as if it were alive, even move toward them, just before she’d looked up, seen them and shouted. They’d run, and as they had, they’d felt her green breath touch their backs. Days later they could still feel something crawling on them, and one of the brothers had scratched himself bloody trying to stop the itch.

When he glimpsed the hut through the trees, he stopped. It was green, yes, but that was because of the lichen. Everything in these groves—tree trunks, walls, and paths—had bright green lichen on it. And something moved, yes, but it was only an olive branch scraping across the hut’s thatched roof. The trees here were not as dead as he remembered them. They had leaves. They were very alive. Why he remembered them as dead, he didn’t know, unless it was that fear had made it seem so. He was not afraid today, so the trees were alive and the sunlight bright—was that the reason?

There was a vegetable garden he did not remember, and a stone path wandering from the hut’s doorway into the grass, where it ended. He began toward it—under the trees, past a green lizard that watched him from a tree trunk, through the grass that reached his bare knees, through sudden yellow wildflowers, to the start of the path, its first flat stone, where he stopped. His heart jumped once in what felt like fear; but the sun was bright, and he clenched the paper bag, feeling his courage.

"*Strega!*" he wanted to shout, because it was true, but instead he said courteously, with only a little anger, "*Signora!*"

No one appeared in the doorway, which seemed small—even for a witch. Now he shouted it:

"*Signora!*"

He rattled the bag just a little. The body was stiff now, and he didn't want to do it; but maybe the old woman, because she was a witch, would hear it and know the reason he was here—even if she wanted to ignore him.

"*Addesso!*" he said, rattling the bag again, wondering how long it took maggots to grow.

"*Voglio parlare con Lei, Signora!*" *I wish to speak to you!*

Had Gian Felice been with him, they would never have come this close. They'd have stayed out under the nearest tree—or the second or third or fourth nearest—and thrown stones at the hut to get her attention, or shouted at her from a very safe distance. But he was too angry for that, and anger could make you feel safe. Gian Felice would have let his fear keep them in the trees, and the witch would know it, and it would give her courage—which the boy did not want. Witches had enough as it was.

Besides, he would not be able to see her hand if he stayed in the trees.

Something stirred in the darkness just inside the doorway, as he had known it would. *This is what witches do*, he told himself. They stir in the darkness—to scare you.

It was silly, the stirring. "Come out!" he shouted, in her language. "I am here to do business with you. Have the courage to come out, *Signora!*"

Had he really shouted that in her language? Had he really known what words to use? Yes, because he heard himself shouting it again:

"*Viene qui! Corraggio, Signora!*"

After a moment the stirring spoke. "*Vengo!*" it said, and the shadow stepped outside.

"*Che vuoi?*" she asked, annoyed, her teeth indeed terrible. Even at this distance they were little yellow sticks, gaps between them, and how she ate (if she did eat) the boy didn't know. Her hair was long and gray, and she was as hunched as he'd imagined she'd be. But she was wearing black, as most old women in this country did, and this surprised him. The old women who wore black no longer had husbands, he knew. Their men were dead—from war, from heart attacks, from *fegato* problems—so they were widows, and widows wore black. But witches had no husbands. That is what Emilio had said more than once. "Witches never marry. They hate men and the boys who will become them!" A witch who wore black made no sense.

"I am here because of what it is in this bag," he said, holding it up, trying to keep his hand from shaking. But it shook, and worse, he was too far from her for his plan to work. He would have to be close enough that with just one step she could take the bag from him—to look inside—and when she did, he would see her hand.

He took a step toward her, stopped, took another, holding the bag out.

No matter what he did—no matter how much anger he made himself feel—his hand would not stop shaking. Perhaps it wasn't fear? Perhaps it was only anger that made it shake?

When he was at last before her, he tried not to look at her teeth, but at her eyes—which were nearly closed, as if afraid of the light. If he stared at her eyes—if he made her feel his anger—perhaps the shaking would stop.

But then he smelled her. It was the smell of old women—old women at the Saturday market in town, old women on the wharf (when they didn't smell like fish), and also the smell of his own grandmother when he was little, before she died. It was the smell of vinegar—“She uses it on her hair,” his mother had once said. He had loved his grandmother, but there were other smells to this old woman, too, and they were not his grandmother's.

Her eyes opened a little then and he saw that one was brown and one was green. This did not surprise him. Witches were not like ordinary people. He was wrinkling his nose at her smell, he realized, but before he could stop himself she said:

“Do not come close if my body offends you, *ragazzo*.”

His courage weakened then, and for a moment he could not find his anger.

“I am not here, *Signora*,” he said as quickly as he could, “to discuss smells. I am here about what it is in this bag.”

He thrust it at her. When she did not take it, he held his hand as steady as he could and waited. If he could not see her hand, he would not know.

When she spoke, he wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly.

“You wish to see my hand?” she repeated.

The bag was shaking even more now, but he made himself nod. “Yes, I wish to see your hand.”

She made a sound like a snort, reached out and grabbed the bag. As she did, she shifted her weight to her other leg, which was shorter but just as skinny. For a moment he thought she might fall, and if she did, what would he do then? Should you touch a witch? Should you help her up?

But she didn't fall. She steadied herself, holding the bag in her hand, and stared at him. He still hadn't seen her hand, but he had to look away. Her eyes *knew* him—his bedroom, his cat, his parents' house—and the knowing made him afraid.

“I know what this bag holds, *ragazzo*. I do not need to look inside it. What dies deserves respect. Not to be put in a bag—not to be opened in the sunlight and stared at. Do you not agree?”

“Yes,” the boy said, and then he saw the green lichen that covered, completely covered, the hut—its walls and thatch roof—begin to move. All of it. To wiggle. No, not wiggle, but to crawl, moving towards them slowly now even as the boy stopped breathing. The hut was moving. No—the lichen was.

But it wasn't lichen. It was—

Lizards.

It wasn't possible. *Lizards*. Hundreds—maybe thousands—of them. The green lizards that lived in these groves were all here somehow, sun-

ning themselves on the roof and sunlit side of the hut, and now leaving their sunny places to move toward him and the old woman.

They were hers, he realized suddenly.

They were her pets.

They were coming to see what a boy might want with their mistress.

And then the movement stopped, and the roof and the sunny side of the hut fell still again. The lizards were waiting, he saw—but for what?

It was like a dream, but it wasn't. It was real. She was a witch, after all, and with a witch anything was possible.

"Then why did you put what you loved—and what loved you—in a bag?" she was asking him, holding it but not looking in it.

He made himself find the words he had practiced.

"Because I wanted you to see it."

"Why?"

"Because I was angry."

"Why?"

"Because I knew that someone poisoned her. I saw the hand that did it. I wanted the person to see what she had done."

The old woman did not speak for a moment.

"Like all boys," she said at last with a sigh, "you understand nothing. But here is my hand, *ragazzo*."

Holding the bag, the hand came toward him, stopping so close to his face that he had to step back.

When a lizard crawled suddenly from the old woman's black sleeve, he almost screamed. The old woman snorted again and the lizard scampered down the side of the bag and back up again to her hand.

"*Via!*" she said to it. The creature returned to her sleeve, where three others were peering out now, watching him.

"Is this the hand you saw?"

It was. Two blue veins made a Y, with the end of the pinky finger missing, just as it was in the bathroom.

He nodded.

The old woman said nothing. It was up to him, he knew.

"Why did you want the soul of the animal I loved?" he asked.

When she spoke at last, it was with another sigh.

"It was not the soul of your cat I took," she said; and though he didn't want it to, it sounded true, and because it did, his anger left him once more, and with it his courage.

"I was taking another thing," she was saying, or at least that is what he heard. Whether she was actually speaking the words—out loud, in the air, in this sunlight—he could not be sure. He did not hear words in her language. He heard his own language and he could not even be sure she was speaking at all—with a throat. "I was taking back," her voice was saying, "the soul of my *lucertola*—my lizard."

It did not make sense. His cat was not a lizard. But then he saw it, because she wished him to: *His cat had eaten a lizard, and it had been one of hers. His cat had ventured into the grove too far, come upon her hut and*

her lizards, and, as cats do, eaten one of them. It was true, he saw. It was not some lie she wanted him to believe.

She had poisoned his cat because his cat had killed her lizard? She had lost something she had loved, too, and had acted in anger?

He could have said, "Was *poison* the only way?"

But then she would say, "I chased your cat away many times, but she kept coming back, curious, ready to eat more of my lizards if I did not poison her."

He could say, "Why didn't you come to my house and tell me? You knew where I lived."

Then she would say, "You would have wanted a witch in your doorway? You would have believed her? You would not, in anger, have come with your friends to throw rocks at her house?"

Worst of all, she might even say, "I killed what you loved to save what I love," and what would his answer be then—except the silence of sadness? She was a witch and might be lying—to make him go away—but it would not feel like a lie, and so he would have no words.

Before he could say anything at all, the old woman—eyes on his, bag in her hand, the four lizards still peeking at him from her sleeve—said, "I know where you live, yes, but I could not have come to you. I cannot leave my house except at dark. But that is not the point of this. The point is that I did not poison your cat."

Now she was lying. He was sure of it. Witches did lie. They said and did what they needed to do and say to get what they wanted—to trip people up—especially children. They hated the happiness and lives of ordinary people—and "They hate the innocence of children," Antonio's mother had told him and his friends at dinner at once—so they did whatever they could to trick you, to hurt you. It had been this way forever. World without end.

"My cat was poisoned," the boy said.

"Yes," the old woman answered, "but it was not poison."

"What?"

"Your cat ate my lizard."

"So?"

"My lizard was the poison."

"I do not understand you."

"My lizards are not ordinary lizards, and because they are not, they are poison to anything that eats them."

She was playing more tricks now. She was saying whatever she needed to say to make him lose his courage forever. It was like a spell, one that used logic to confuse the mind—to take away confidence. He could feel himself spinning within it, the spell, like a moth in a spider's cocoon.

He wanted to run, but he couldn't. He needed the bag back. How could he leave without it?

"You are putting a spell on me," he said, as if saying it might change it.

"Words have no power," she answered, "which the listener does not give them."

This was true. He had thought this himself when his mother, in an

anger she would not let go of, used words that made him feel shame. Without her words, he knew, there could be no shame.

"That is true," he found himself saying, not wanting to but saying it anyway; and when he did, she made a little smile with her mouth. It was both wonderful and horrible. The little sticks showed against the dark hole of her mouth, and the skin of her lips pulled tight, as if on a corpse's skull, cracking. Little lines of blood appeared in the cracks, but the smile did not give up. It stayed.

If it was a spell that he was feeling, it was not a bad one.

"What are they," he asked suddenly, "if they are not lizards?"

After another snort, she said:

"They are what is left of the man I loved."

As he stared at her black dress, the one so many old women in this country wore, he knew that this too was true.

As if tired out from her smile, she frowned then, but said gently enough:

"Come in."

This was how the story always went, didn't it? The witch would get the boy or girl inside her hut, and that would be the end of it. As Perotto had told them once, a witch's spells are more powerful where she lives—in her own hut—where, like her smell or breath or bony hand, they are a part of her and have her power. She needed to get him inside to do what she wanted to him. Any witch would. The gentleness of her words was a lie, wasn't it?

"I cannot make you enter," she said. "I can only invite you."

This had to be a trick. This kindness; this honesty; this pretending she didn't have the power, the spells, to *make* him do what she wanted. "A witch," Emilio had told them, "will tell you anything she needs to tell you." Emilio knew because his own uncle had been killed by a witch's spell during the war. "With a lie she got him to sit beside her on a bench in the old cemetery, telling him she was there to grieve her sister. She touched his hand just once, but it was enough to put it on him. Fifteen days later he died in his bed like a dog!"

She was offering him the bag now. He could leave if he wanted.

"If you will not come in, you should have your cat back, to bury it as you wish, to say a blessing over it because it was something you loved."

This was not how witches were supposed to talk—such kindness. It was more trickery. It had to be. He would grab the bag and leave before she changed her mind.

But as he took the bag from her, the lizards in her sleeve scampered down her arm and onto his. He jumped and started turn—to run—but she was looking at him with her one brown eye and her one green eye, and the lizards did not feel wrong. They scampered down his arm again, back up, and stopped, watching him. He could not look away. They were green and beautiful and they seemed to like him. If they were a trick, they were not a trick from any story he had ever heard. They were not howling black cats or screeching owls or hissing vipers, the pets witches were known for. They were green and cheerful, and he was sorry he had ever killed the lizards of this country.

As he looked at the ones on his arm, the walls and roof of the hut began moving again like a slow green wave toward them. They flowed like water, down the path, under the old woman's feet, around them, to his own sandals. For a moment he felt a jerk of fear, but their toes and tails on his bare legs tickled, and he couldn't stop a smile.

When the wave stopped at last, he was covered with them. His arms and legs and shorts and shirt were green. He itched, yes, but it was fine.

"Come in," she said again; and walking carefully so as not to knock any of them from him, he followed her into the hut.

As he stood in the darkness with her, she touched his arm lightly and he didn't jump. Then she whistled once, as if calling a dog, but it was a witch's whistle—not just a sound in the air, for ears, but something more. As she whistled, a green light swirled like fog from her mouth, and the lizards that had followed them in, their tiny faces faintly by the dim light from her mouth, looked up at her from the floor.

She had begun to whisper, too, and it sounded like "*Ricordatelo*"—"Remember him"—and the lizards, in the light of the fog, their eyes like green stars, began to move toward the dark center of the room.

Beside him her voice said, "Can you see our bed?"

He could. In the dim green light he could see, in the middle of the floor, what looked like blankets, heavy wool ones, lying on a piece of lumpy canvas. What was inside the canvas he didn't know. Straw, rags, old clothes—anything to fill it. The bed was on the floor, and, except for blankets, it was empty. He was sure of it. But the lizards were gathering there; and as he looked at the green shadow that was the bed, it began to change. It was empty, yes, but *something* was taking shape there.

The lizards on his arms and legs moved once and fell still. He took a breath.

"This is where we slept when the war was over."

"Yes," the boy heard himself say, and a lizard moved from his neck to his ear.

"We lived here because we were poor," she was saying, though in what language he was not sure. "My husband, whose name was Pagano Lorenzo, picked grapes at Bocca di Magra. That was what he did."

"Yes," the boy said again.

"Do you see him?"

"What?"

"Do you see my husband?"

"No. . . ."

"That is because my sister, who lives in Pozzuoli, the village of red doorways, killed him. She did not have a man. Her man, whom she did not really love, died at Monte Cavallo in the war, while mine returned. She hated me for my fortune and one day asked us to dinner. She made *dateri*, using the darkest clams, and the portion she gave to him was poisoned. It is easy to do if you know *stregheria*, if you are *strega*. You could poison your sister in jealousy—or at least try, witch to witch—but why bother? Why not instead take away what she loved, what you yourself do not have, so that you can watch her grieve forever? Do you see him now, *ragazzo*?"

The boy, who was shaking again, blinked and brushed a lizard's tail from his eye. He could see that the shadow on the bed was bigger now. He could feel the lizards on his arms and legs leaving him to join the others on the bed, where the shadow was growing.

"I—I . . ."

"Boys who tell stories about us do not understand. We cannot do *everything*. I could not save my husband. He died on this bed from the poison, the kind used for rats, and he died in great pain. With a spell she blinded his tongue to the taste of it and he ate it all."

The shadow on the bed was darkening and he could not stop shaking. It was not a ghost he was seeing, but something else.

"I did what I could, *ragazzo*. The lizards of these groves felt for us the affection we felt for them. They had lived with us, and we with them; and so, when my husband died, I gave his soul to them—a piece to each—a thousand pieces. . . ."

The boy was shaking so hard he could barely stand. The shadow on the bed was complete, and the old woman, though her legs and hip hurt her, stepped to the window now to open it. As sunlight fell to the bed, he saw what the lizards had made, the shape they had taken: A man, sleeping peacefully on his stomach, green as lichen in the sunlight, but one that in the night would be as real as a man needed to be for his wife, with her memories, to fall asleep.

She had wanted the piece of him back, that was all. He saw it now. She hadn't poisoned his cat. The lizard had. The lizard that was a piece of her husband's poisoned soul.

"I sleep well at night," the old woman was saying, "because we sleep well when we sleep with what we love. How do you sleep, *ragazzo*?"

As the boy walked back through the groves to his house, the bag in his hand, he could hear the grass rustling just behind him. How many there were, he did not know. A hundred perhaps, maybe more. He wanted to look, but did not want to scare them away. Even when he reached the steps to his house, he did not look back. He got a shovel from the shed, returned to the nearest trees, and dug a hole where his parents could not see him digging. There he buried the body, saying the blessing as he filled the hole with dirt. He used the Lord's Prayer, of course, because he had used it before when his pets had died; but also because he did not know another. They waited in the grass while he did this. Then he went back to the house, to his room—stepping quietly past the kitchen and his mother's anger, which did not have to be his anymore, he knew—and saw how it would go: He would open his bedroom window just enough that they could enter at will, sunning themselves on the windowsill when they wanted to, coming in when the sun had set. That night—and any night he wished it—he would need only lie down on his bed, whisper "*Remember her*" to the darkness, and wait to feel the tiny feet and tails moving over him as the animal—the one he had slept with every night for a year—took shape beside him, paws tucked neatly under it, body somehow warm, so that he could sleep at last. ○

CAFÉ CULTURE

Jack Dann

Jack Dann's last story for us was the Nebula-Award-winning novella, "Da Vinci Rising" (May 1995). His latest novel, *The Rebel: an Imagined Life of James Dean*, came out from Morrow in August 2005. (Check out www.ReadTheRebel.com and/or visit the author at jackdann.com.) Jack lives in Australia on a farm overlooking the sea and "commutes" to Los Angeles and New York. After far too long an absence, he returns to our pages with a deeply disturbing look at an unpromising future.

A word of warning: there are scenes in this story
that may be disturbing to some readers.

"From these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

—Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

After six Baptist suicide bombers met their god in the fiery nave, aisles, apse, towers, and main altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the cafés that crowded Fiftieth and Fifty-First Streets became de rigueur for writers, artists, actors, news personalities, wealthy dilettantes, activists, dissidents, tourists, the Christian left, and wannabees. Young Muslim women, faces covered in black muslin, sipped ginger ale beside their Armani suited, bearded partners, while students wearing Christ's Commandos® T-shirts argued about the morality of selling a watch that had lodged in a schoolgirl's neck during an explosion on a school bus.

"Well, the poor thing's dead. The suicide bomber's watch went to pay for the funeral."

"That would have been one heck of a funeral."

"It was."

Max Rosanna's Café was always mobbed with those who needed to be seen and those who needed to see, and the outside tables closest to the stained glass door of the establishment were always on reserve for the titled, the famous, and those who could slip old Max a thousand dollar bill for a sweaty croissant and a flat white coffee. Max's was directly across the street from the cathedral ruins, and Max had his contractors cement the shards of stained glass from the exploding cathedral into the floors and ceiling of the café. At night, lights strobing, Max's would glitter like an old psychedelic dream.

But it was spring, 11:00 AM, Friday, and the pioneers of the New Rebellion, the New Yorkers who would not show even a flicker of fear, wanted to be in the street. They were boarding their buses, riding their subways, sipping their coffees, eating their croissants and bialys, being seen at Max's, and taking their chances.

Leo Malkin couldn't afford Max's, but he had done some renovation work on the café for the fat man and was always guaranteed a table *somewhere* on the premises. But on this clear, clean, beatifically sunny Friday morning, not a chair could be had; it was like trying to get into the Ginza Bar or the Peppermint Lounge in the middle of the last century. Two bouncers kept the line of desperate patrons-to-be away from the patio of the café, which looked like an oasis of shadow under its awnings and umbrellas.

After being patted, introduced to a soap opera star, and consoled by Max, Leo walked toward Sixth Avenue, toward the demolished RCA Building. Every café was mobbed, and the conversations buzzed like flies on the street. He passed a boy of around fourteen, who glared at him with absolute hatred. Leo nodded to him, which, admittedly, was a stupid reaction. *Maybe it's because I look Jewish, but I could just as easily be Arab, and he looks Semitic.*

"Hey!" Leo shouted at the boy.

The boy turned and stopped. He had delicate features, dark skin, big brown eyes, and coarse black hair cut in bowl fashion. He looked somehow familiar.

"What's with the look?"

The boy was wearing jeans and a checkered work shirt; both were slightly too large for him. The jeans were rolled in heavy cuffs over his engineer boots, the shirt was long and wasn't tucked in. The boy shook his head and smiled a beautiful ragamuffin smile that somehow chilled Leo to the bone.

And then the beautiful boy was gone, snapped back into the crowd.

Ikrima Margalit walked jauntily down Fiftieth Street, the distant sun warm on his face, his ultra-light explosive vest more like a silk handkerchief than a vest constructed of material that would make a belt loaded with C-4 look like a New Year's Eve sparkler. He carried no detectable shrapnel, no old fashioned (yet effective) ball bearings, no nails, screws, nuts, or thick wire. His very bones would pierce the nonbelievers. He would explode like a claymore mine, and, somehow, God in his mercy

would turn the very sidewalk, cars, and streetlights into killing, cleansing objects of death. Those who understood such things used to call acetone peroxide Mother of Satan because it was so unstable; but this new explosive was stable as a table, and it was called Mother of God after the blessed Virgin.

To his right and across the street was the old Macy's building; to his left was the noisy line of cafés his mother called temples of corruption. They didn't look like anything but cafés, and the people sitting around sipping coffee and smoking kef were young and happy and pretty. The air smelled perfumed. The hydrogen-powered cars whispered past, as if in slow motion; every once in a while a driver would honk his horn in dumb rage and desperation and would be automatically fined. It was a perfect day, and young Ikrima could feel God so very close to him, could almost hear him between the noise of conversation, the susurrations of tires, and the occasional honking horns and sirens. Ikrima knew exactly where God was. His mother had told him that He was just on the other side of the vest that was now like part of his body, part of his very being; and right next to his skin was Paradise, and there, in Paradise, being looked after by the perfect virgin houris were all his friends and heroes, including his blessed father. His mother was on this side of Paradise, with him; and although Ikrima was shivering, as if cold, as if his clothes were cold and wet, he wasn't afraid.

His mobile rang, a tick-tock melody, the very latest song from *Memri*.

"Hello, Momma."

"Hello, Ike, my blessed son. Tell me where you are?"

"I'm at the place. It's just up ahead, and I can see the fat man you told me about, the one who is corruption to corruption."

"Yes, my son."

"I am almost there, Momma, but I see two girls. They are Muslims, Momma. Dressed in—"

"They are not," his mother said. "Whatever their dress. Now tell me when you are ready."

"Now, Momma. I love you and will see you with God in Paradise."

"Yes, my darling, yes," and Ikrima Margalit pressed the little button of a detonator and became light, exploding, exposing light. He flew to his God in a million pieces. The ground exploded and shards of glass and cement and steel flew like missiles into flesh. The fat man Max exploded in the light, as did everyone around him, and Ikrima joined the houris in self-abnegating love, vengeance, and honor.

Ikrima's mother Dafna stood in the living room of her commission apartment on 184th Street. She was in her early forties, yet still considered beautiful and shapely. She held the tiny mobile phone to her ear, but the connection was dead; all she could hear was the scratching of her coarse black hair against the earpiece. Her son was suddenly, just-this-minute dead, immolated in the holy cleansing fire of jihad. One minute she was with him, speaking with him—*Oh, my darling, how I love you*—and the next minute she was listening to her own breathing while her beautiful, precious, brave son made his instant transit to God. He would

not be tempted and seduced by life; he was the most precious of God's martyrs. She dropped the phone and bowed to Allah, who made her simultaneity of grief and poignant joy possible. She felt an overwhelming warmth in her loins, as if she were truly being touched by God. She felt a buzzing in her ears, as if God was speaking directly to her, whispering to her like electricity; and she bowed to Him in the East, then fell to her knees in prayer. She nodded, finished, and stood up, shouting joy at the top of her lungs. Her neighbors pounded on her door, which she opened so that she might accept their congratulations; and they sang, "This is not a grieving tent. This is a congratulation tent." She and her beautiful son Ikrima would soon be together in Paradise. He had done his duty, his last act of devotion. Soon she would do her own divine duty; but first Dafna had to work, for it was Friday, and all her clients paid her on Friday. She cleaned townhouses, condominiums, and co-ops on the Upper East Side inside the Wall of Safety. Once she had collected her money—everyone paid in universal, which was as good as cash—she would go to the Martyrs' Center and pay for her order of posters, bracelets, calendars, wall hangings, fridge magnets, and watches, which all contained pictures of her martyred son. Then, as a last act of faith, contrition, and celebration, the Martyrs' Center would distribute the trinkets and keepsakes along with baskets of food and medicine to everyone in her building.

Thus did Dafna accept her neighbors' well-wishes, tears, laughter, encouragement, cakes, and coffee; then she politely shooed everyone out of her apartment, took off her favorite crepe linen *abaya* with chamoisette fringes, hung it in the closet on a pink, cushioned hanger, and donned her own explosive vest. Dressed in jeans, flannel shirt, and a coarse black *hi-jab* that covered her hair and fastened under her chin, she left for work.

Leo Malkin wasn't going to work today.

His manager Sam Feinstein had arrived at Mrs. Edelman's penthouse at eight sharp with a plumber and a carpenter to renovate her bathroom. Mrs. Edelman was one of Leo's best customers, for she owned four slum apartment buildings that needed constant maintenance. Sam knew what to do and didn't need Leo's help, even though he insisted on calling Leo every five minutes for authorization. Sam did most of the work these days and would oversee five jobs today. Leo concentrated on bringing in new customers, keeping his distributors sweet, taking care of the books, and hiring helpers and tradesmen for Sam. Although it wouldn't buy him a Roller or a condo inside the wall, it was a living.

His Aunt Martha had willed him a lifetime tenancy in a three bedroom walk-up on West Seventy-Ninth Street, which boasted "glimpses" of Broadway. Leo couldn't sell the condo, nor could he redecorate or renovate without permission from the estate's attorneys; and as he had no children who could inherit, the condo would probably end up going to a distant cousin . . . or, more likely, to the lawyers. His ex-wife Cheryl loved the flat, as she called it; and when she left him two months ago, she told him it was harder leaving the flat than leaving him.

Leo loved Cheryl and was devoted to her—obsessed with her; but for all his pleading and coaxing and acting out, she had left him for a tall, lanky,

flat-chested, curly-haired woman named Nandy. Now how the hell could you fight that? He tried, oh, Lord, had he tried. He had even swallowed his pride and accepted Cheryl's invitation that they all live together for a while as an experiment. Cheryl, for her part, was oh, so solicitous in every way. She gave him her body whenever he asked, she always invited him to go out with her and Nandy, and she even urged Leo to sleep with Nandy, which he did. After that, he felt tainted, hollowed out by the empty pain of grief, which he located in his solar plexus. He lost twenty pounds. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer and asked them to leave. They joined a commune somewhere on the Lower East Side and became sub deacons of the First Church of the Epiphany.

Leo walked along the edge of Central Park until he came to Seventy-Ninth Street. His house cleaner Dafna would be cleaning his apartment today. Since he usually wasn't at home when she cleaned (she was pretty, and Leo didn't want to chance a lawsuit), he always left her money and a note on the dining room table. She had her own set of keys.

But he definitely wanted to see Dafna today.

He had heard the explosion at Max Rosanna's Café, went back to see the carnage, the explosions of flesh and fragmentation of bone, the wounded and limbless, the dead and dying. He scanned his mobile for police reports of the suicide bomber: the perpetrator was a boy (or perhaps a girl, the announcer said) with a bowl haircut and checkered shirt (according to video from a nearby street cam); and Leo remembered the beautiful boy he had passed on the street, remembered the look of hatred and scorn, and remembered seeing him once before—for Leo never ever forgot a face.

Leo had seen the boy when he had interviewed Dafna at his condo.

He quickened his pace.

Of course, the chances were long that Dafna wouldn't be working today.

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She took her money from the envelope on Mr. Malkin's dining room table and left her keys; after all, she wouldn't be coming back there again. She contemplated just leaving without cleaning, but she had been paid to do a job; and she was not going to leave this world owing anybody anything. Except God. To Him she owed everything. Before she started cleaning, however, she took advantage of the privacy of Mr. Malkin's home to adjust her explosive vest just one last time. It was too tight around her breasts; she had pulled it tight purposely to be reminded of the closeness of Heaven and her son Ikrima; but it hurt her nipples, as her son had when he suckled. She went into Mr. Malkin's marble bathroom, which was due to be washed down with stronger detergent, and took off her *hijab* and work shirt. She loosened the vest, rubbed under her breasts, which were itchy, and then prayed and carefully checked and retied the vest, taking special care that the detonator wire wouldn't catch when she moved her arms, bent over, or arched her back. Then she prayed and thanked God for giving her this opportunity to please him. She would do her allotted tasks, and then without a backward turn, without even going to the toilet, changing her clothes, or washing her face, she would blow herself into Paradise on a crowded street during the rush hour.

Such was her plan . . . until she felt the profane heat of someone's eyes staring at her. She screamed as Leo Malkin grabbed her, pinning her arms behind her back. He was breathing heavily, like an animal, she thought wildly. He smelled of tar and sweat and burning; he smelled bestial, like the streets, like Hell, like darkness.

"Don't move," he said, shushing her, squeezing her, and Dafna prayed, for surely this stinking pig of a man was going to rape her, bloody her vagina, which had not felt the monstrosity of a man since her husband died for God. She tried to wrench free of him, pull away just long enough to detonate her vest and blow this eructation of a building into dust and entrails; but Leo was implacably strong and disgustingly erect. She closed her eyes tight, waiting for the inevitable. If he loosened his grip for an instant, she would send him to Hell...while she would be carried by winds of fire into Paradise.

But he pulled the wiring away from her vest in one quick, smooth movement (after all, he was an electrician), and she sobbed as he relaxed his grip. He held her, as if this could become an impossible, tender moment. She felt his erection pressing hard against her, felt a terrible, ugly, guilty warmth suffusing her groin. She would give herself up to him. She wouldn't fight. She would be a statue: unfeeling, unyielding marble. There would be another day for her to join her son and husband as a martyr, and what was going to happen to her now, the horror of the next few moments, would purify her as a martyr.

Perhaps, just perhaps . . . she might escape, run away, repair her vest, hand out gifts, explode into Heaven.

Abruptly, he released her.

"Take the vest off," he said.

"Not with you watching me."

"Either that, or I'll take it off for you."

She nodded and removed the vest, handing it to him while she covered her breasts with her right arm. He turned away from her and, standing in the bathroom doorway, said, "Put your shirt back on." She did and he demanded she give him the detonator, which she had tried to hide from him. "I saw your son," he said.

"My son? Where. . . ?"

"On his way to Max's. I know what he did. And so do you, don't you."

Dafna met his gaze, would not avert her eyes.

"Your son looked at me the same way you are now," Leo said. "How could you . . . why?"

And she smiled at him, just as her son had.

"Let me pass, Mr. Malkin, or do you wish to see my breasts again and humiliate yourself?"

Leo stepped aside, and as Dafna walked past him, she felt an inexplicable regret. She felt an urge to succor and comfort the beast, to give herself to him. Dread and claustrophobia followed her into the elevator and into the street.

If she had her vest, she would have pressed the detonator.

But her last filthy thoughts would forever bar her from the ecstasy of Heaven. She had consigned herself to the humiliation her son and husband had escaped.

Holding the vest to his chest, Leo paced back and forth in the living room. He was still breathing heavily, was still excited, guilty, humiliated. Why had he allowed her to pass? To walk away? To procure another vest and murder innocents? He laughed at his thoughts, for there were no innocents, except little babies perhaps; but not much of the world was lost when little babies fell back into the darkness from whence they came. Leo took off his shirt, loosened the straps of Dafna's vest, and then put it on, shrugging into it as if it was an old, comfortable sweater. He pieced the wiring back together, just a few twists, and made sure the connections were solid. The wiring was bluecoat, which was virtually undetectable. He put on his shirt, slipped the detonator into the side pocket of his trousers, and walked out of his condo.

He left the door wide open.

It would be a good long walk downtown along Broadway, past the up-market shops and bistros, past the checkpoints, and into the mid-town/downtown safety zones. Safely pacing, heels clicking on pavement, pushing through the crowds, walking in a straight line, fully focused, Leo and his vest, wires, and detonator went unnoticed. His mobile buzzed and vibrated insistently in his pocket, but he ignored it.

He was calmness itself.

He walked to the First Church of the Epiphany on Tenth Street without incident. The church was a confection of Gothic Revival style and Stanford White design. He admired it and then walked inside, where he admired its famous and magnificent mural by John Le Farge. He stood veiled in crimson light from the great stained glass windows above the nave and waited. Cheryl and Nandy would surely be arriving soon, and Leo would greet them with loving kindness and personally guide them into the blinding light and exploding stillness of ascension. ○

THE WINGS OF ICARUS

Fly neither too high nor too low was his advice,
That careful artificer,
Moderate in all things as he ever was.
But how can any soul be moderate
When the sea's a breathing carpet of deep blue
Sown with diamonds, and the sky a softer blue,
And both are beckoning?
I will soar to the warmth of the sun,
Swoop to the cool embrace of water,
Bathe in my freedom in sea and air,
Fly too high, too low, too far, too fast,
And if I fall,
I fall from a height no man has reached before.

—John Morressy

THE HIKIKOMORI'S CARTOON KIMONO

A.R. Morlan

A.R. Morlan lives in a Queen Anne House in the Midwest with her “cat-children.” Her work has appeared in over 118 different magazines, anthologies, and webzines including *Night Cry*, *Weird Tales*, *F&SF*, *The Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Full Spectrum IV*, and *Sci-Fi.com*, and her short-story collection, *Smothered Dolls*, has just come out from Overlook Connection Press. The multi-layered and textured tale that follows is her first story for *Asimov’s*.

“...we have to answer the challenge of modernity: what is a kimono, or what will it become, if it ceases to be a thing worn?”

—Kunihiko Moriguchi (one of Japan’s preeminent kimono painters; from: “The Kimono Painter,” Judith Thurman, *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2005)

I (Obi)

“The nail that sticks out gets hammered in.”

—Japanese saying

It didn’t matter how often Masafumi saw Harumi Ishii walk through the autoclave room door in the back of his employer’s tattoo parlor—his reaction was invariably the same: first, a sharp sudden intake of breath, not

unlike his response to the initial visits of his rescue sister Mieko back in Japan, in his parents' house. Back in Tokyo, the reflexive shortness of breath was understandable. There was a strange woman standing on the other side of his bedroom door, bare knuckles touching the thin wood in a patient, persistent *rapraprap*, waiting with trained politeness born of dozens of encounters with other men of his kind, suffering from *hikikomori*, the withdrawal. Masafumi had wondered, there in the comfortable, yet painfully familiar confines of the room he so seldom left for all those months, those years, if women like Mieko looked upon their job as a form of service, or as something more insidious, a means of forcing those who'd chosen to withdraw from life, from society, and ultimately from unwanted responsibility, to become a part of that hellish social miasma . . . simply because *they*, the rescue sisters (or the occasional rescue brother) hadn't had the self-reliance necessary to withdraw from life, as he and his fellow *hikikomori* had done with such ease, such completeness.

But no matter what he'd thought of Mieko (with her schoolgirl's mini-skirt and bleached-to-coarse orange streaks in her hair, despite her three-decades-plus age), she'd kept on coming, twice a week, to stand for hours at his door, knocking and imploring, begging and rapping, until her sheer tenacity wore him down, and he'd opened the door—only a crack, enough for a quick glance at her—and asked, "What?" Not the *Why?* or the *How?* he'd longed to ask (he knew too well that the *Why?* was cultural pressure, Japan's need for all to have a place, to be successful, just as *How?* was the result of his parents calling for the aid of a rescue sister to cajole him into leaving his room, before his nineteenth birthday.)

"Because I'd like to get to know you," was all she'd needed to say; as rehearsed as her words sounded, there had been something in her eyes, in the quirky flicker of a smile on her lips, which had been enough, at least then, to make him open his door just a bit wider. . . .

But that was Mieko; as far as Harumi (of the natural brown-orange hair, worn in elaborate quasi-Incan kipus of braided, knotted, and wooden-beaded swaying tresses, and the minimal clothing) went, the second thing Masafumi would do was lower his eyes, their lashes forming a capri-shell screen between him and the object of his fascination, as if she might be offended by his stare.

(His boss kept telling him, "If she don't want people to look at her, why have all that ink drilled into her hide? Or do her hair in coked-up dreads?")

For her part, Harumi either pretended not to notice his persistent shyness, or didn't notice him in any real sense aside from being aware that there was another space-taking, breathing form in the small room. True, she literally had her hands full of wooden trays of *momengoshi*—firm, well-drained "cotton" tofu flown in daily from Japan, to be served an hour or so from now, after Harumi worked her magic wand across the pliant creamy white surfaces. Masafumi prided himself for having learned that nickname for a tattoo gun from one of his boss's many repeat customers. On occasion, he'd shyly remark about it as Harumi worked, and, often, she'd smile.

Setting the layered trays of tofu on the low table nearest the outlet

across from the autoclave, she peeled back the cheesecloth coverings, revealing the waiting slabs of skin-solid tofu, one tray at a time, prior to picking up the prefilled ink bottles that contained freshly squeezed *yuzu* juice and onion-skin dye, then attaching them to the old, slow-vibrating tattoo machine Masafumi's boss gave to Harumi for her exclusive use. After plugging it in, and turning it on, she filled the small space with the insect drone of the quick-darting three needle cluster.

A tired, yet apt cliché, *only in America*, spun in his brain as he watched Harumi work; without need for a stencil spotted onto the waiting surface, she worked the business end of the wand over the tofu, leaving weeping sprays of pale, citrus-scented pigment on the gelid upper layer of the processed bean curd. Her designs varied by her mood; today, he surmised she was troubled, obviously agitated, judging by the wild waves-breaking-on-rocks chopppiness of the design. Finishing one tray, she shoved it aside with a dismissive thrust of her lower left palm, moving so quickly that the smooth-bottomed wooden tray nearly slid off the low table—until Masafumi put out both hands to stop its momentum.

This time, she did notice him; letting out a shuddering exhalation smelling of cinnamon and cloves, she locked her hazel eyes into Masafumi's dark brown ones, and said, "You saved my *ass*—no way no how could I bring that back to the restaurant with tatami-mat lint on it. The chef, he'd *know*—"

Masafumi nodded.

Shutting off the gun, Harumi let out another sigh. "Your boss, he wouldn't want me smoking in here . . . but when I'm done, you wanna join me for a stick? They're clove, no nicotine—"

He started to shake his head, then mumbled, "I'll stand with you while you smoke. I don't."

Harumi shook her head; her intricately braided and embellished strands of hair rustled and whispered, like the silk-on-silk sound of a woman wearing a layered kimono, delicately stepping along a subway platform. A sound Masafumi had not heard in the years he'd lived here, in a particular United State called Minnesota, yet the motion of Harumi's head brought it all back, so vividly. . . .

"You're something else, y'know that? Not many guys are willing to breath in used air, but you . . . why am I not surprised that you would?"

(Over time, Masafumi had learned enough of the intricate nature of the English language to know better than to consider her questioning tone of voice to be an actual question. A *yoko meshi* thing, that inherent stressfulness of mastering, not merely learning, another tongue.)

Harumi uncovered another tray of naked tofu, and switched bottles on her gun, taking up the pale reddish brown onionskin ink she'd distilled herself in the restaurant down the block. Watching her ply the needles across the yielding, fleshy foodstuff, as the tattooed woman created starbursts of sunset-ruddy pigment, Masafumi found himself uttering a thought that had been in his brain each time he'd watched her work, "Why do you not do this in the restaurant? You carry the trays here, you carry them back, while the gun stays—"

Over the ear-numbing drone of the gun, she replied, "My boss and the

other cooks, they can't stand the sound. Some of the early customers, they can hear it, ruins the whole exotic dining experience. Now the inkjet printer we use to print designs on the starch-paper, that's pretty quiet, compared to *this*. If you ask me, aside from being useful for wrapping up sushi rolls, starch-paper covered with pictures of *maki* rolls and *amazu shoga* and *heni shoga* pinwheels is just a piece of starch-paper, y'know? It's still something *extra*, which you don't need. But what I'm doing here . . . *this* is true edible art. 'Cause the art is *in* it, a part of it, even if it's a subtle taste thing. I mean, these slabs are gonna be chopped up, and steeped in broth, so all the customer sees is a hint of color on each piece, and *maybe* detects a hint of onion or citrus if their taste buds are halfway alive, but still, it's *there*, part of it. It's not a coating of cartoon sushi someone slapped on as an afterthought, all because some guy down in Chicago came up with it a couple of decades ago in *his* restaurant. I dunno . . . does this make any sense at all to you?"

This time, she was asking a question. But how to answer? Even as she spoke of food, novelty dishes, to be precise, Masafumi was reminded of *his* former art, that of kimono-painting. That same art that had eventually brought him to such a state of despair, of utter inability to decide something as simple as which new outfit to wear upon waking, that he'd taken the route of no road, of no destination. Staying in his room, week after month after year, where nothing associated with his former art could be found—no *aobama* ink, no tiny zinc granules of *makinori* to be sprinkled across silk, then fixed in place with rice paste, prior to being coated with wood wax, then fixed on the fabric with soy juice . . . and no disassembled eight panels of silk, waiting to be painted, resist dyed, then sewn back into that ancient "T" configuration which had been the staple of the kimono design for centuries. Eight panels of cloth, eight chances to turn the two-dimensional into the three-dimensional, once the final element of his art was included . . . the woman wearing the kimono. While Harumi understood the excess of something merely *added*, Masafumi didn't know if she'd understand the inherent obstacle of his art in itself—there was the design to be added, then there was the woman within, who'd give life to the design, but in the middle was the kimono, eight inevitable squares of cloth, two each for the front and back, the remaining four for the sleeves, culminating in literally a "thing worn"—always, no matter how one decorated a kimono, in anticipation of the woman who was to wear it, the "thing worn" *itself* had become his creative nemesis. When those eight pieces of cloth began to insinuate themselves between Masafumi and his artistic ideal, preventing him from instilling his creative will directly onto the being that would give it real life, he'd given up, withdrawn, become a twilight ghost who only ventured out of the house for short trips to the neighborhood *konbini*, the Japanese answer to the convenience stores that popped up in fungal stealth by the day in his new country, his adopted city.

True, cartoon sushi and hand-painted kimonos had little in common save for being something worn by something else, but Masafumi didn't know if Harumi cared about his *hikikomori* episode, his lost years . . . even if she'd asked him in a direct question about her own art, and its purposefulness.

"I suppose . . . one is an embellishment, while the other is an . . . ingredient. Both are edible, but only one is essential."

She smiled at that. For the first time, he felt bold enough to sit down on the tatami mat next to hers, his chest level with the tattooed sheets of *momonogoshi*. He wasn't certain, but he thought he smelled the faint odor of citrus and onions against the creamy bland near-nothingness of the tofu. Leaning over to peer at her freeform designs, he surprised himself by suggesting, "If they serve *kinugoshi*, do you think branding the tofu first would survive the deep frying process?" He hadn't thought of *kinugoshi* in years, but the mere utterance of the word brought back that creamy, custard-like texture of the silken tofu's interior, after one bit through the deep-fried exterior, which rested unseen but curiously *felt* on the tip of his tongue, like a lingering aftertaste combined with the phantom sensation of silken smoothness.

"Oh *man* . . . they could call it 'kiss of fire' tofu, whatever the Japanese is for that. I mostly know kitchen-Japanese, just what my dad's people used to use when they cooked for family gatherings. That's what happens when races intermarry . . . my name's more Japanese than *I* am. Guess how many nationalities I could check off on a census form?"

How to answer that? Not only was her hair autumn-leaves-on-wet-cement mingling of browns, oranges, and a hint of red, while her eyes were a sparkling green-brown hazel, but her skin was creamy pale, more so than that of mainland Chinese women. Her eyes were closer to almond than Asian, with only a slight corners-tilt of the eyelids to hint at an ancestry not wholly European. Her voice was purely Minnesotan, a closed-mouth way of speaking, with rounded "o" sounds within words. But with a lilt that reminded Masafumi of bamboo wind chimes. . . .

"Eight." Shutting off her magic wand, she ticked off nationalities on her fingers and thumbs: "Japanese, Norwegian, English, Irish, Swedish, German, Polish, and, again on my dad's side, Chinese, from some mess during some war nobody wants to speak about. Every generation on his side, the people's hair and eyes got lighter and lighter, and their eyes got rounder. But we all go in for Japanese first names. Drives everyone else nuts. And I'm shit out of luck if I get sick and need new bone marrow or an organ transplant. No way no how they'll find a matching donor for me . . . which is why I decided years ago that I'm gonna live the way *I* want, 'cause there's no turning back for me. I can't abuse myself with a backup plan of getting a new liver from someone else, so I can tear myself down all over again. I consider myself a statue I carve day by day . . . if something gets hacked off, it has to stay off. I mean, some art is meant to be disposable, no?"

Another question. Not sure how to reply, he demurred, "So that is why you tattoo and brand yourself, because you are your own artwork. And what you do with your hair—"

"Yeah. I thought I'd visually add another ethnicity into the mix. 'Dreads, on account of nobody in the family hooked up with a black person. I like 'dreads. I don't have to wear a hairnet or scarf while I cook."

"You don't serve at the restaurant?"

"Do I look like I fit in with the décor?"

A rhetorical question, which could be safely ignored.

"That idea of yours, about branding the tofu . . . mind if I run it past my boss, see what he says?"

A shrug, followed by a smile from her. Putting aside the gun, she got to her feet and began pulling the cheesecloth over the trays, prior to restacking them. Slipping the bottles of edible dye into her shorts pockets, Harumi stood up, and said as she lifted the trays, "You come by the back of the restaurant, later on, okay? I get a smoke break after one. Can your boss let you go for half an hour or so? I just gotta talk to someone. You'll be there?"

So many individual questions, but thankfully, a lone answer.

"Yes . . . I will be there. He'll let me go."

(Masafumi was still an apprentice tattooist; his main daily duty was to sterilize equipment, plus dye the batches of carbon nanotube ribbon some customers wanted implanted in their skin—an off-the-books procedure, thanks to the increased invasiveness of the implantation process—unless some skin-virgin wanted a bit of off-the-wall flash spotted onto their skin from a pre-drawn stencil . . . "tourist tattoos" his boss dubbed them, basic, simple designs deemed suitable for Masafumi to ink their waiting flesh.)

"Good. See ya then." She was gone, leaving only the smack of her flip-flops against her bare feet to echo in Masafumi's ears.

Once she'd left, Masafumi's boss Ignazio pushed aside the beaded doorway curtain and stood there grinning, his bare chest (embellished with flames both tattooed and carbon nanotube augmented; the flames seeming to flicker in the early morning sunlight) already sheened with a fine coat of sweat from the July heat, while his thin sushi-pale lips curled into a smile over slightly protruding front teeth.

"How 'bout you convince her to do her thing out in the main area, where the customers could watch, huh? She'd bring in more business—"

"It is not sanitary . . . there is blood, out there. There is none back here—"

"Not so literal, Masa, not so *literal* . . . just wishin'. I know 'bout health regs for the food business. I'm just sayin' she's one fine lookin' woman. And yes, you can go meet her at one. Don't go givin' me that look, kid. Remember, this door's got air holes." Giving the strings of beads a clinking shake for emphasis, he went on, "I'm just yankin' your chain. Sounds like she's got somethin' on her mind, and believe you me, there's nothin' more intimate than a woman who unloads from the inside out. Better than her takin' off her clothes. Clothes, they come off, they're off, but a woman who unburdens, that's a one way ticket to *real* intimacy. Some guys don't want no part of it when a woman dumps a mental load on them, but take'er from me, that's when you can get *real* close to 'em. And that one's worth getting next to, from the inside-out. Me, I've done all her inkslinging, I've felt damn near every part of her, but do I *know* her? She doesn't say so much as 'ouch' when I'm workin' on her, not even when I give'er the kiss of fire with the branding tool. But you, you get an e-ticket. She's gonna have A Talk with you. Tell you what's been makin' her so jumpy lately. Now that's gettin' *close*, my man. Consider yourself blessed. Uh-oh, someone's comin' in. But enjoy the flavor, man. That woman, she is how you folks say, *oishii*. Peace,

man,” and with that, he was gone, headed for the tattoo chairs, leaving Masafumi to his stainless steel autoclave, and his low-sided vats of dye-bathed nanotube ribbons.

Giving the nearest tub of crimson dye a slosh, to better infuse the nearly transparent ribbons (far thinner than human hairs) with a shimmering wash of color, Masafumi winced over his boss’s misuse of the word “delicious” . . . true, in a vulgar sense the word might apply to a woman, if one thought of her in such a crass way, but in a more elemental sense, Harumi was “*oishii*,” if one thought of something delicious as that which leaves a beautiful memory of its flavor in one’s mind. Not like his memories of Mieko, an underlying bitter emotional aftertaste. Even as she had helped him, she’d also taken something from him, which created a sour lingering unpalatability which forever clouded her good intentions in his impression of her.

But what Ignazio had said, about someone who unburdens themselves becoming more naked than those who disrobe (not that the Miami transplant had uttered anything that eloquent), only served to remind Masafumi of his former passion and nemesis, the kimono . . . given that there are so many layers to a kimono, one cannot begin to remove it without first untying the obi which binds all the inner robes into one garment. . . .

II (Osode)

“*Ancora Imparo*” (“I am still learning”)

—Michaelangelo

When she saw him walking toward her, Harumi held out two black lacquered bowls of *zaru dofu*, the mauvish-blue hued “black” variety he hadn’t seen since he’d left Japan, and each bowl had a spoon stuck directly in the center of the moussé-textured tofu. Masafumi’s spoon was sliding downward to the east as he took his bowl from her, but he’d grabbed the long silver handle of the utensil and shoved a frothy rounded spoonful into his mouth before the handle had a chance to fall against the side of the shiny bowl.

As he swallowed down the delectable treat, Harumi said, “I didn’t know if you liked *zaru dofu*, but I figured it was way too hot out for me to bring a plate of *katsu-dou*.”

Considering that most non-Asians might consider fried pork cutlets with scrambled eggs and sweet *donburi* sauce-covered rice a breakfast dish, and since Harumi was seven-eighths non-Asian, Masafumi decided she was joking. Smiling as he swallowed his next spoonful of fluffy tofu, he added shyly, “And two orders of *tekka-don* might be too messy to carry, no? The strips of raw tuna and pressed seaweed might fall off the rice?”

“I told my boss he needs to put food like that in a wrap, pita bread, or a soft taco, but the guy’s a purist. Totally jumped the couch when I suggest-

ed he put *zara dofu* into soft drink cups, and stick a straw in it. I mean the straw part was the joke—"

The image of a tall plastic cup filled with white, green, or black moussé-textured tofu was a funny one. Chuckling as he scraped the bowl clean with his spoon, Masafumi said, "Ignazio, he likes to repeat something that singer Johnny Cash said. 'You know you've made it when your face is on a Slurpee cup.'"

"Ignazzy's a cool dude. Did all my ink, he tell you? Thought so. He wants to put pictures of me on his wall, but I told him no. Last time I refused, he said he'd sign the next fineline work he does on me. Ever hear what he says about doing portraits on customers?"

Ignazio spoke so much, and so often, it was difficult for Masafumi to take in everything he said, so he merely shook his head.

"Ignazzy says, 'If you're doin' a dude's face, and it ain't turnin' out so hot, make it into Johnny Depp. He's played everybody there is, so chances are whoever you inked looks like him anyhow.' I thought he was just talking to hear himself talk, but I looked into it, and Ignazzy's not lying. Depp was Hunter S. Thompson, George Jung, that dude who pretended to be Donnie Brasco only I don't know who he really was, the guy who wrote *Peter Pan*, some English poet who was like a total sexual pig back when guys wore those powdered wigs, and somebody else I know I'm forgetting—"

"The chocolate maker?"

"Yeah, he was a character in a book, but Depp played him, too. He played *everybody* at some point or another. Chances are, you put his face on someone's arm, they're gonna be pleased; even if they wanted someone else. But you should listen to Ignazzy more often. He was smart enough to get his butt out of Miami before the big hurricane in '24. People didn't learn from Katrina twenty years earlier. 'Course, Miami wasn't under sea level like New Orleans, but still, who'd have guessed about that category five—"

Masafumi wondered if the mental unburdening Ignazio spoke of was preceded by a woman clearing her mind of inconsequential trivia. He doubted that her concerns over portrait tattoos or a flight from Hurricane Xenia's path had made her so nervous that morning that she'd almost knocked over a tray full of freshly inked tofu.

Between blurted out observations about his boss ("—he told me that white and green *zaru dofu* would 'give Wayne Thiebaud a boner' and I had to go online to find out he was a guy who mainly painted desserts, cakes with layers of frosting so thick you could spoon it off the canvas—") Harumi slid spoonfuls of the frothy tofu into her mouth, and, when her bowl was empty, she set it down on the ground alongside his, and began pawing through her shorts pockets for her pack of clove cigarettes and a lighter.

It took a few puffs to clam Harumi down, but once she began tapping fragrant ash upon the back wall of the building she was leaning against, she half-closed her eyes and asked, "Does a wanna-be donut-graveyard named Walker Ulger come into your boss's shop? Sorta fat dude, in a security guard uniform? Has this shapeless round face, like a *manju*?"

He tried to picture a man with a face that resembled a bean cake filled with red azuki bean paste and sugar, but it was difficult. Yet, her description had the vague half-remembered reality of a dream—

"If you'd seen him, you'd remember. Fat fleshy upper ears, like thick-sliced *amazu shoga*—"

Where the *manju* reference failed, the comparison to pickled pink ginger succeeded. Only Ignazio didn't use food as a point of comparison.

("If that slug-eared rent-a-cop comes through my door again, I will personally cover his pink hide with sorry marks from my own fingernails.")

Masafumi found the mental picture of his boss creating Aboriginal ritual scars on someone's body a disturbing one, so much so that he'd never let Ignazio know that he'd been listening in on his conversation with that customer who was getting the fine-line full back design of the Corpse Bride and her reluctant groom. The customer was a city councilman, or so Ignazio claimed, and Masafumi felt it unseemly to admit he'd been listening in when a government official—no matter how minor—was involved. But he'd still heard what the man said in reply:

("Not to worry, Iggs. After what he did in the Mall of America, when he was assigned to the kiddie park section, no way no how is he going to get anyone to give him a nano-ribbon jacket. As if he's gonna be hired anytime soon by a real cop-shop. He's lucky to be wearing that Halloween costume and Happy Meal badge of his—")

Masafumi had to take something into the autoclave room that day, so he never did hear the rest of what the councilman had to say, nor did Ignazio ever discuss the matter later on, but Masafumi knew the two men had to be discussing Ulger. With his pickled pink ginger ears.

"I've not seen him, but I've heard about him. But not by name—"

"Oh, there can't be two of *him* . . . nature wouldn't be that cruel or that damned stupid. I suppose Ignazzy still does nano-tube body armor, under the table, on real cops?"

Nodding, Masafumi replied, "Since it's still a medical procedure, it is not fully legal, but considering how expensive doctors can be . . ." his voice trailed off, but she knew full well that inserting nano-tube ribbons into the topmost layer of flesh was a quasi-legal enterprise at best. Technically, there was no law against it, just as there were no laws against a bod-mod expert doing just about anything to a willing client—as long as no anesthetics were used. Nano-vest installations were uncomfortable, but less painful than the kiss of fire, or a full back tat. What happened was this: ultra-fine ribbons of pulled and spun nano-tube "yarn" were laid onto lightly scored flesh, along the neck, upper shoulders and outsides of the armpits, spots where a Kevlar vest failed to cover the body. He'd never seen it done, but saw a tape of the operation on public access HDTV. Akin to a hair transplant, fine shallow hash-marks and cross-hatching were incised with a raked tool, barely scoring the epidermis, then a baster-like syringe loaded with miles of "yarn" was laid down and drawn—depositing strands of "yarn"—across each incised spot, laying down an internal bulletproof webbing. Once all the scored skin had been seeded, everything was wrapped up, and, within a few days, the incisions healed, and cross-woven nano-ribbons within formed unseen body armor. The voiceover on

the tape said that this application of nanotech had saved over one hundred officers from death due to bullets which missed their body armor. At the time, Masafumi thought the whole process was far more disgusting than tattooing, branding, or piercing could ever be, save for traditional Irezumi tattooing in Japan, which used to involve literally tapping the ink into the flesh with a multi-toothed stick and a mallet.

It had also reminded him of the complex process of *yuzen zome* resist dyeing, the painstaking delicacy that was an inherent part of the kimono dyeing process, or worse yet, the application of poppy-seed sized *makinori* . . . he winced at the memory of arranging the minute particles on the cloth, after mixing them with rice paste, sprinkling the sticky mess onto wet silk, then coating the silk with wood wax to prevent the design from cracking, before fixing the entire swath of cloth with soy juice . . . *then* picking off each piece of zinc after it was dry, just to achieve a mist-like subtle pattern in the background of the main design. Why he'd ever thought that such intense, yet nearly intangible labors were his chosen life's work, his life's *purpose*, now escaped him.

It made his current work, of quickly yet painfully piercing flesh, creating a fine wash of blood that constantly had to be wiped away from his work field, seem far more simple in comparison.

"—doesn't stop Ulger from wanting his nano-armor, even if he isn't entitled to it," Harumi said between puffs of her second clove cigarette.

"Does he not carry a gun? That might mean getting shot—"

"Strictly a Barney—empty, no bullets . . . you never watch TVLand, do you? The store owners gave it to him for window dressing. Like a security camera with no film in it, just a battery to make the red light go on. I wouldn't be surprised if someone didn't want to take a shot at him, for the hell of it . . . or *not*," she added with a noisy draw on the end of her smoke, before dropping the spent conical butt onto the asphalt and grinding it into the shapeless grainy mass with her flip-flop sole.

"I . . . understand he made my boss angry. So he's done the same with other people?"

"Ohhhh *yeah*, you could say that. *Again*. I don't know for sure what he did to Ignazzy, but given that he's a *he*, it sure isn't what he did to *me*...but it must've been equally rotten—"

"This Ulger person—"

"Walker. Walker Ulger, rhymes with 'stalker'—"

"This Walker Ulger, he didn't behave as a man should toward a woman?"

(Memories of his initial reaction after Mieko's first unwelcome beyond-his-closed-door visit, when he'd punched his walls in frustration because she'd been where he hadn't wanted her to be, came back to him in a shameful wash of crimson.)

"Uhhmm, you could say that. It started out innocently enough. I was smoking in the alley behind the restaurant, a clove jobbie, and he starts in about me smoking weed, insisting it was a joint, and I finally gave him the center finger salute, and he starts in that he'll report me to my boss for 'assaulting' an officer of the law, only all he is is a play cop, and I told him as much, but then *he* goes, 'I'm on the payroll of your boss and every other boss on this block, so that makes me the 'law of this land' and makes

a grab for my smoke. I mash it onto his arm, he goes medieval on my ass, and . . . ever since then, he's been on my case. Riding me for not genuflecting when I see his badge. Claims that he'll stop harassing me if I get him an in with Ignazzy, convince him to give *manju*-head a nano-yarn sweater. Which I know Ignazzy won't do. And I don't blame him . . . whatever Ulger did to Ignazzy must've been as obnoxious as what he tried with me. What I'm thinking is, old *amazu-shoga* ears must've leaned on the wrong person, which is why he feels that he needs a nano-yarn wrap. I can feel the fear on him, which makes him all the meaner. Anyhow, everyday, he comes into the restaurant for *miso zuke dofu*, never pays for it, even though it's an expensive dish, and while he's eating, he asks my boss about *me*, making suggestive remarks, telling him he should add a living sushi bar on Saturday nights, that I'd be better than cartoon sushi under the raw tuna . . . crap like that. All the while, I stay hidden in the kitchen, wondering if Ulger will mention me burning his arm with the cigarette, which I know will get me canned if my boss hears about it. And every day, when I'm getting ready to go home, Ulger keeps pace with me while I'm riding my bike, saying, 'All you have to do is put in a good word with Ignazio. I know he has the extra nanoyarn in his autoclave room. Too much of it for just us cops.' Crap like that. So . . . *that's* what's been making me crazy lately. Enough to dump a tray of tofu onto the floor—"

"*Tokugawa shogunate* . . ." Masafumi found himself whispering, as he made a connection between Harumi's ongoing troubles and that fifteenth century restriction measure that ultimately created the painted kimono tradition. So simple a connection, yet it explained so much—

"*Toku*' . . . what?"

"*Tokugawa shogunate*.' It was initiated six hundred years ago and cut down on excessive spending by the merchant class. It forbade them from wearing embroidered silk, or cloth woven with gold threads, to stop them from emulating royal classes. But the merchant class members' wives still wanted fine kimonos, so painted silk circumvented the *shogunate*. Because of this desire for finely decorated kimonos, artists like Miyazaki Yuzen switched from painting fans to painting silk meant for kimono construction. Like . . . cartoon kimonos. Embroidery designs, only flat, not embroidered. But difficult to produce. Eventually, kimono painters became *ningen kokuho*, like other fine artists in Japan—"

"Remember, I'm only one-eighth Japanese—translation, *please*?"

"It means 'holder of an intangible cultural property,' an honor—"

"Oh, like those Kennedy Center Awards they give to old people?"

"I . . . suppose. It is something to be strived for, within any artistic community. To be named *ningen kokuho* implies more than mere mastery of one's craft—"

"Like, you're the best of the best?"

Wondering if she meant "you're" to signify *him*, or if she was merely being linguistically imprecise, he slowly replied, "You are beyond 'best' . . . you're interwoven with the entire culture of Japan. What you have done has become part of Japan. Something that cannot be disconnected from its origins."

"Oh. Like sticking nano-ribbons into someone, and there's no way to pull them out once they've been healed?"

Glancing down at his watch, Masafumi saw that they'd spent far more time in the alley than he'd been allotted, so he avoided comment on her incorrect analogy by nodding vaguely and saying, "Break time is over—"

"Yeah, mine too. Old Ulger should be in soon, mooching *miso zuke dofu*. I swear, I should substitute a slice of old rubber tire for the *konbu* wrapping, just to see if the oaf knows the difference between retread and dried kelp. Now *that* would be a dish with some 'bite' to it!"

Glad that Harumi could make even a weak joke about her tormentor, he picked up the empty bowls and handed them to her, saying, "Tell your boss it was *oishii*—and thank you again."

"Anytime, Masa," she smiled, then smacked back to the restaurant, the echo of her hard soles hitting the rubbery insides of her flip-flops following him as he walked to the back to his job.

He didn't know if Ignazio would consider this encounter "gettin' close" to Harumi, but in his own mind, Masafumi decided that the meeting was the equivalent of freeing a woman's big-sleeved outer *osode* kimono from the remaining layers of kimono beneath. Even as that unveiling had served to reveal emotional layers of his own psyche that he'd tried to keep pinned down, much like the weights placed on freshly made tofu, in order to squeeze out the remaining *nigari*, that salty congealing agent that both created tofu and threatened to ruin its taste if not expelled from the cured form. Just as his own thwarted creative urges had to be expelled from his being, lest they dilute his present artistic course.

Yet, as he let himself into the back door of the shop, he realized for the first time since he'd ended his years of *hikikomori* that he'd actually managed to come back to, and not distance himself from, that which had made him retreat into himself in the first place. Always that maddening conundrum: How to make that which is merely worn into something that comes alive because it is worn?

He'd thought that his new vocation, inkslinging, was more direct than kimono painting—spot the stencil on someone's body, ink it in, wipe away the blood, and bandage it, job's finished. But after spending time with Harumi, taking sly glances at her tattooed body (an *Irezumi*-like covering from collarbones to elbows, and down to the bottoms of her thighs, a swirl of native Japanese flowers, clouds, and distant mountains, surrounded by foamy-crested curlicue waves), and listening to her rant about that fat-eared security guard, Masafumi had come to realize that with each movement of her body, each rapid fuming breath between words, her tattoos ceased to be ink imbedded in flesh, and became an additional garment. An article of indelible clothing that had no doubt helped to make her a target of that goon with the toy gun, who nonetheless wanted her to procure him a suit of nano-armor. For Masafumi doubted that Harumi was the only person in the city who smoked clove cigarettes (which even he realized smelled nothing like cannabis).

"My man, you score?" Ignazio's sweaty face was open-eyed and leering, showing virtually all his teeth in a tight stacked-stone line. Masafumi debated about mentioning Ulger, but decided not to. Instead, he slipped past

Ignazio and walked into the tattooing room with the various paper-on-a-roll covered chairs and padded tables, whose walls were covered with glass-fronted flash design displays, and print-outs of digital photos of most of their customers' tattoos. Sitting down in one of the chairs, he said carefully, "I learned what has been bothering her. It's a private matter, but one she could share, in part. She brought me some black *zara dofu*. It was very good."

"I'll bet it hit the spot. Me, I like the green and white kind better. Why don't you go in there, where she works? I've never seen you in that place—"

There was no way to explain that back in Japan, Masafumi would've eaten the same dish at a *riyori*, a tofu restaurant, and not at a place that served a multitude of dishes, from sushi to *katsu-don* to *yudofu*, plus a wide variety of sakes to go along with the simple *manju* dessert. Extreme mixing of culinary disciplines was far more alien to him than the fast-food hamburger place down the block, where he chose to eat instead. There, the mixing of unsuited foods was a normal thing, and thus *not* bewildering.

"This is my country, now. So I eat what others eat. Going back to my origins in one way would mean wishing to go back to them in all ways."

"You're one weird duck, kiddo. But cool. Seriously cool, my man. Best worker I've had since this place opened. Know what? You've been doin' flash for too long. Time to branch out. Start learnin' how to work the nanoribbons. Insert'em, the whole ball o'wax. Now I'm aware you still can't brand nobody, and as far as piercing goes, you're still gonna have to take some classes I'm not gonna pay for, but seein' that there ain't no place you're officially gonna learn how to work the nano-ribbons, class starts as soon as someone comes in here wanting some work done, okay?"

Biting his lip so that he couldn't ask about Ulger and his thwarted efforts to "get some work done." Masafumi nodded, before saying, "You're the boss . . . you want me to learn the ribbons, I will learn them."

—even as his mind began whirling like *suminagashi*, leaving whorls of half-formed ideas and urges to settle like ink swirls on marble paper, as he realized how he *might* be able to solve Harumi's problem . . . not to mention the central puzzle of his own creative existence.

If he told her next to nothing beforehand. . . .

III (kosode)

"Art is a matter of life and death. This may be melodramatic, but it is also true."

—Bruce Nauman

"So you've never worn a kimono?"

Harumi worked the tattoo gun over the tray of *momengoshi* without speaking for a few seconds, then said, without looking up, "No, in my fam-

ily, we were lucky to know what tofu was when I was a kid. I have an old picture of my great-great-to-the-I-don't-know-*what* power grandma-san wearing one, but that's it. The picture wasn't in color, so I don't know what it really looked like. There were clusters of birds on it, I think. Plus this big sash around her middle, with what looked like a flat pillow on her back. The whole kimono trailed onto the ground in back of her—"

"Obi. The sash was an obi."

"Ohhh . . . be. OK. And the sleeves were huge, and hung down—"

"The *osode* . . . they resemble dewlaps, the sleeves. The *osode* goes on over the *kosode*, the undergarment. That picture had to be very old. By the Edo period, *kosode* was no longer thought of as a mere undergarment, but as a thing to be worn alone. Years before that, women wore up to twelve kimono, each one positioned so as to reveal just a bit of the one underneath. By the time I left Japan, most women who still wore the kimono for important functions wore only the *kosode*, as a main garment."

"I can't see how anyone could move in that many layers—they must've looked like sumo wrestlers." Shutting off the gun, Harumi began stacking the wooden trays, but, as she got to her feet, something in Masafumi made him shout past the beaded doorway, "Ignazio, do you mind if I help Harumi carry these to the restaurant?"

Above the drone of his own needles, Ignazio shouted back, "Go on, kid. Get yourself a bite while you're there. I'll be a while with this guy," and as easily as that, Masafumi, two trays in hand, left the shop and followed Harumi to her workplace. As she walked ahead of him, he wondered how her arms and legs would look, if she were to add additional designed bands just under her existing torso-and-upper-limbs tattoos, in a different pattern, like layered *kosode*—

"Awww, Queen Mary Jane has a court now." A brief sideways glance past Harumi's stiffening back revealed a bulky tan-suited shape, surmounted by a blob of a face topped with limp bristles of short-cut dull brown hair, and balanced on each side by thick slug-meaty ears.

Walker Ulger. He of the empty pistol and the unfulfilled longing for unseen armor. From what Harumi had been telling Masafumi over the last few weeks, ever since she'd opened up to him in the alleyway, Ulger had been making more and more stops at her employer's restaurant. No longer content to settle for his free meal of saffron-hued *momengoshi* steeped in fermented *miso* wrapped in *konbu*, he'd begun to wait around the inside of the place while others ate, watching them, making strange comments about the food, and the people eating it. But since this part of the city was seldom, if ever, visited by the police (whose budget cuts were legendary), the shop owners put up with their private security guard's antics, lest he, too, turn on them, as the Vietnamese street gangs in the Twin Cities had gutted those two cities back in the teens.

And always, whenever he saw Harumi, Ulger would bring up the nano-yarn sweater, as she dismissively dubbed the body armor he so persistently sought. Daily, she'd tell Masafumi, who sat and nodded, waiting for the autoclave to finish sterilizing the implements of his trade, even as he stole glances at the vats of nano-ribbons steeping in the brilliant pigments. Harumi liked to talk, so Masafumi seldom had much to say to her,

and he never mentioned the lessons in nano-implantation Ignazio had been giving him. One customer was a worker at a sporting goods company whose products (athletic balls) used nanotechnology, and whose workers made ribbons of the stuff in their spare time by attaching a small slip of sticky paper to a patch of nanotubes one third of a millimeter high. They then pulled the 'tubes, which clung to each other and formed a long transparent sheet, into ribbons. In exchange for a full-body tattoo, the customer would "pay" for his tattoo with bundles of the stuff. These home-made ribbons weren't like the ones produced by automated factories. Those were always two meters long. The hand-rolled ones were about half that length. The official nano-ribbons resulted in a denser armor, because the person laying it down was able to work for a longer period with the same continuous strand before going on to the next piece.

For their purposes, the shorter lengths of "yarn" worked out exceptionally well . . . once Masafumi became used to wearing the magnifying goggles needed for such minute work, he soon became adept at judging just how much "ribbon" he needed to augment a body design. All he had to do was score the flesh, a shade harder than a fingernail scrape, then drop on the nano-ribbons, and let them settle down onto the waiting depression in the skin. The work reminded him of the African and South Pacific body ornamentation that resulted from opening wounds on a body, then rubbing something into the wounds to prevent them from healing flat and smooth.

Once the ribbons were in place, their inherent capacity to store solar energy made even the most basic tattoo (or raised brand) look alive. As he studied under his boss, Masafumi wondered if that was part of the allure of body armor for this Ulger person. The subtle sheen of augmented flesh was like a badge that could never be removed or a pistol that never needed to be polished. It was sad, how lacking Ulger had to be, to desire such outward amplification of his being, of his status, such as it was. . . .

When Harumi said nothing, but kept on walking, Ulger moved directly in front of her, blocking the sidewalk with his big spread-apart feet and his elbows-jutting arms, his hands placed on both hips. The restaurant was only half a block away, but Masafumi knew that even if he and Harumi were to try and walk in the street, alongside the passing cars, Ulger would find some other way to block their path, perhaps one that would leave Harumi's morning's work lying in fleshy piles on the heat-shimmered asphalt.

"You want to carry these? Because if you do, I already have help."

"Yeah, I see . . . he your new tattoo boy? He gonna finish up your arms and legs for you? Or is he gonna outline what you do have with nano-yarn? He gonna quilt you? I think he's gonna turn you into a coloring book, black outlines around everything—"

"Yes, he *is*. Satisfied? Or do you intend to stick around and watch him do it?"

"*I thought* he was a tattoo-boy. Only he don't like what he does to others, does he?" Ulger looked at him with a chin-first thrust of his shapeless, bristled head, peering at the Japanese man's ink-free arms and lower legs.

Considering Ulger's law-enforcement skills, Masafumi decided that giving the city over to a street gang, of any ethnicity, would be a more pleasant option.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't seen him naked. But my friend here is full of surprises, so I'm not assuming anything about him." Harumi shifted her tray of tofu from one arm to the other, then made a break for it in the narrow space between Ulger's left elbow and the brick façade of the storefront next to the Japanese eatery. Masafumi likewise slipped past the rent-a-pseudo-cop, albeit making sure that he grazed the man's mushrooming waistline with the corner of one of the wooden trays. Noticing that Ulger failed to flinch at the glancing blow, Masafumi smiled, and followed Harumi into the pungent-smelling interior of the restaurant. Behind him, he felt the heavier footfalls of Ulger, so he didn't startle when he heard the blatty voice say in his ear, "And where do you think *you're* going, huh?"

"The kitchen, where *do you* think the tofu goes?" Harumi snapped over her shoulder, and then Masafumi and the young woman were in the kitchen, past the swinging doors that smacked into Ulger's belly as they shuddered to a stop. The room was hot, filled with sizzling, boiling, and sputtering meat noises, and lest he be overcome by a torrent of culinary nostalgia for his homeland, Masafumi asked, "Where's the back door?" Following Harumi's pointing finger, he hurried past the stooped black-haired cooks hovering over flaming burners, and quit the room for the less humid alleyway beyond.

It wasn't until he was a couple of back-doors from Ignazio's shop that Masafumi realized he had company, there in the alley. Ulger. Waddle-stomping toward him from between two buildings, *manju*-shaped face worked into a doughy frown. Before the man could speak, Masafumi said quietly, "Sir, you do not wish to harass me. Not if you desire a . . . what do you call it, 'nano-yarn sweater'? I'm more than a tattoo boy. I am a learner, in the process of learning.

Real cop or play cop, nothing Masafumi said now would give Ulger cause to harm him, or so he hoped, and counted on.

"Harumi, she tell you—"

"Harumi? No, she's said nothing about it. Nothing at all. But this desire of yours, it is known to others. Who have in turn enabled me to fulfill your wish. If you still desire it be made so—"

"You sure Harumi didn't tell you?"

"Very sure. As I said, others have mentioned it, in passing. And I have heard them. Just as I've heard that doctors will not do this for those who don't carry an official badge and wear loaded guns, but there are others who will perform such a service—"

"Not that Miami reject boss of yours—"

"I didn't mention him. But there are others who will perform this service, regardless of whether one's pistol fires bullets or air—"

"I know Harumi said—"

"No. Nor does she know how to . . . knit such a garment. But I do. And I would be happy to do so, upon request."

"Upon request' like you'd do it for free?"

"Being an apprentice, I'm not in the position to require a fee . . . but one must consider the worth of that which costs nothing. It is your choice. Excuse me, I must get back to work," and before Ulger could speak again, Masafumi was inside the autoclave room, and over the now comforting drone of Ignazio's needle, her heard his boss shout, "You two have a nice walk?"

Giving the nearest low-walled vat of dye-bathed nano-tubes a gentle shake, watching the wave-like undulation of the transparent fibers within, Masafumi smiled and yelled past the curtain, "Nice . . . you could say that."

"That's my kiddo. Next time she comes in for more ink, I'll let you do the slinging, okay by you?"

Images of narrow bands of patterned flesh warred with more graphic, if equally finespun, mental pictures of oozing human cross-hatching within Masafumi's brain, as he echoed, "Okay by me. . . ."

"Masa, remember what you said about women wearing layered kimono, how a little bit of each kimono showed . . . were you joking?"

Pretending to be engrossed in the spiking arcs of onion peeled lines Harumi inked into the firm tofu surface, Masafumi shook his head slightly, then said, "The Heian period, around the late seven hundreds, through the eleventh century. If you can find the novel *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki, she describes the nobility of Kyoto and Nave wearing layered kimono. I read it in Japan. . . . It's one of my mother's favorite books. I think she still has her copy."

"You think?"

"She and I seldom write, or call. She and my father, they were eager for me to leave the house, to leave Japan. It was an . . . understandable parting of the ways."

"Oh. Like they kicked you out?"

"Not precisely. But it is partly true. They kicked me out of my room, within their house. Your family, when they gather, do they speak of *hikikomori*? Someone on your father's side may have witnessed this . . . disorder. It is common, in Japan, less so in Taiwan, South Korea."

Sliding her finished tray his way, Harumi uncovered the next slab of fleshy-firm tofu and ventured cautiously, "You mean those guys who used to stay in their rooms, for months, years even? Not talking or eating with their folks? My dad's dad mentioned something like that. So . . . you're . . . one of them?"

"Was one. My parents, they hired a woman, a 'rescue sister' to come to my door and lure me out of my room. Once I came out, she took me to this place, in Tokyo, called New Start. A meeting place for fellow *hikikomori*. Here, you might call it a boy's club. There was one female *hikikomori* there, while I was in attendance. But she was an aberration. Far more males do . . . what I did."

"So one morning you decided to hide. Not get up, or leave the room? I think everyone I know has felt that way at least once—"

"Not the same . . . not at all. For me, for *us*, the staying-in is a response to pressure, to expectations. When one cannot fulfill one's destiny, it is better to retreat than to exist as a failure."

"If that's the case, Ulger should be hiding under his futon in his apartment. I can't think of anything worse than running around pretending to be a cop, down to wanting body armor to take up the slack from a bullet-proof vest that he doesn't even own—"

"Walker is not Japanese. And I doubt many expectations were placed upon him," Masafumi said succinctly.

Harumi mentally digested what she'd heard, then said, "To me, he's a more likely candidate for being a hicky-whatever than you could be. You're just a kid now, and you said you were locked away in your folks' house for *how* long?"

"I didn't say how long. It was enough time. I was at an age where my future should have been set, but . . . my doubts diluted my artistic destiny. My parents, my teachers, they were sure of what I was to be, but me . . . the uncertainty, the inexactitude of my calling, all of this served to render me unable to do anything more than simply *be*, in my room. It's difficult to explain further. The people at New Start, they advised me to change paths, seek other outlets for what minimal talents I possessed.

"I've seen your work, Fumi . . . there isn't much more that Ignazzy can teach you about inkslinging that you don't already know. How long have you been working for him, two, three years? Your work's fine, just fine . . . in fact—" here her voice took on a different tone, less conciliatory, more eager, "—what you said about the layered kimono thing got me to thinking . . . what I have on me right now is sort of like a short kimono, no? But what if I add bands along each arm, and each leg, with a suggestion of the pattern of some more kimonos underneath? Y'know? With thick bands of black to delineate the difference between each 'sleeve.' Sort of like what that pretend-cop suggested, a quilting type of thing."

Masafumi felt emotionally, creatively, naked, sitting there on the tatami mat next to Harumi. Ignazio had also suggested that he work on Harumi, and now, she herself was requesting that he ink her, a most personal, even intimate request. As if his own wishes had been made flesh. . . . But as he pictured her future body illumination, his mind echoed with another imagined transformation, that of a lowly play-badge for hire into something slightly more legally augmented. That the two creative works were so thoroughly linked in his consciousness somehow tainted the former while increasing the repugnance of the latter.

But she was expecting an answer . . . just as that slug-eared thug had been badgering him for the last few days, constantly requesting a specific date—and suitable price—for his own transformation.

Realizing that to honor one request must invariably mean fulfilling the other as well, Masafumi said slowly, "Would you be open to a form of barter, as payment for my work? It's not the most pleasant option, but one that I think will turn out to be satisfying for you . . . in, how do you say it, 'the long run'?"

"By 'not the most pleasant option' do you mean unpleasantness, as in...say, that Ulger freak?"

Nodding, Masafumi anticipated her refusal, but was pleasantly shocked when she said, "Do whatever you want to me in front of him, as long as it culminates in getting him off my back. . . ."

"So, you kids sure ole Iggy-nazzy won't come back, spoil our little inkslinging party?"

Outside the lowered shades of the tattoo parlor windows, the last rays of the setting sun cast narrow deep orange shafts of light on Harumi's body as she stood in the middle of the room, while Masafumi spotted the freshly inked narrow stencils around each of her upper arms above the elbows, and encircled each thigh with a two-inch wide band of intricately patterned freehand flash. Once he was done rubbing the transfer paper against her skin, Masafumi stepped back to make sure all the elements of each design were successfully spotted onto her skin. For his part, Ulger squirmed around in one of the tattooing chairs, eyes narrowed, upper lip curled back over his flat-bottomed, oyster white teeth, breath coming in noisy hitches through his flaring nostrils. He'd accepted Masafumi's terms readily; if he was allowed to watch "Tattoo Boy" apply four around-the-limbs tattoos on Harumi, he'd be given that elusive nano-yarn sweater . . . *if* he never bothered Harumi again. If he were to break that promise, and continue to harass her, the real police would get a call reporting a non-official bearer of the restricted body armor nano-weave.

Luckily, Harumi's limbs were thin and the single-needle black outlining of her tattoos went quickly, if awkwardly (for him to tattoo the backs of her thighs and arms, she had to lie face down on the tattooing bed, resting on her already tattooed limbs), and once the outsides of each new leaf and flower were inked, he switched to a seven needle cluster, to create the background wash of color. Given that his needles touched his previously incised inked lines with every pass, Harumi's eyes began to water, even as she defiantly refused to let out a sound, lest she increase her audience's pleasure at her discomfort. Masafumi heard Ulger's panting breaths over the drone of the tattoo gun, and when he was done laying down the pale greenish white background, he gave Harumi an *I'm so sorry* wince, as he put a three-needle tip onto his tattoo gun, and began inking in all the deep green leaves.

Five colors later, and countless swipes of his now-bloodied wipe cloth, Harumi's limbs shone with brilliant, slightly raised bands of color, the merest hints of a far more intricate design not quite fully seen "beneath" her previous tattoos. But her fleshy kimono was now layered. As she gingerly walked toward the mirror on the back wall of the shop, ignoring Ulger's wolf-whistles, Masafumi pictured her wearing a real kimono over her tattoos. One that was made of a transparent fabric, gauze, or perhaps even uncut sheets of that nano-fabric those factories made in bulk. This was the answer to his imponderable quandary, that unbridgeable gap between the artistic vision and the material reality. A design that literally moved as the woman wearing it moved, even as she still maintained the formality of the now outdated kimono's restrictive T-shape. In his excitement, he almost forgot about Ulger sitting there, waiting for his "payment." Harumi was so beautiful in all her inked glory. Only her pale shorts and narrow tube top marred the perfection of her fleshy garment. Yet hadn't Ignazio told him that the people who attended those tattoo and Body Art conventions often took the judging stage all but naked, to bet-

ter show off their ink? If Harumi would allow him to create additional "layers" of kimono on her skin, could she not wear a transparent kimono when taking the stage?

"Masa, you're the man . . . and Walker—what can I say? You *ain't*," Harumi hissed through a tightly puckered pair of red-shaded lips, then, after blowing Masafumi a kiss, quit the parlor, stepping raw and bandageless into the early evening street beyond. Sure that she'd be able to tend her own fresh tats, Masafumi slowly turned his attention to Ulger, who was busy fishing something out of his breast pocket . . . a syringe, filled with a pale clear liquid. Grinning and squinting at him, Ulger said, "I do guard duty for the pharmacy down the block . . . I know they ain't gonna miss this. Just like I know you ain't gonna say squat about me using it, right?"

Realizing that Ulger had stolen anesthetic, the one thing forbidden to anyone undergoing non-medically sanctioned body modifications, Masafumi merely shook his head, disgusted by the man's cowardice, yet simultaneously elated by the sight of Ulger feeling his own neck for a vein, then shooting the contents of the syringe into his body. From what Ignazio had told Masafumi, nano-ribbon implantation was far less painful than getting a small tattoo. Wanting to snap, *Too bad you didn't bring enough to share with Harumi*, he instead waited until Ulger's eyes grew dazed and his head lolled before saying succinctly, "Remove your shirt. And put your arms on the armrests. Another thing—don't speak as I work."

With the cheerful obedience of a cow marching along a slaughterhouse tunnel, Ulger started to say "okay" then substituted the finger sign for okay instead. Before his eyelids drooped over his eyes, Masafumi told himself, This . . . will be so good.

Through the magnifying goggles, the skin of Ulger's neck became a landscape of raked sand and occasional rock-like protuberances, dotted with short scruffy shafts of kelp-dark hair. As he minutely scored and hash-marked that barren soil of enlarged pores and pliant flesh, Masafumi forced himself to think of rough fabric, not supple enough for a kimono, but perhaps suitable for an obi, to surround and bind the layers of a kimono into a whole . . . and as he worked, incising, and laying down strands of nano-ribbon that looked nearly hair-thick under the most extreme magnification his lenses allowed, artistic urges took over utilitarian purpose. His realization that this was not a job meant to protect, but merely a prop meant to prolong Ulger's delusions of legal servitude, began to guide his hand. His efforts transcended their agreed-upon boundaries. . . .

. . . and when he was finished, and had slathered the freshly laid nano-ribbons with ointment, and bandaged over his creation, he kicked the bottom of the chair, to rouse Ulger.

"All through."

"Uhhmmp? Done? I got my armor?"

"It's within you. Although the addition of an actual vest will greatly augment the protective element."

Oblivious to Masafumi's irony, Ulger shakily got up off the chair, and as

he gingerly felt the bandages criss-crossing over his neck, shoulders, and under his arms, said, "Y'know where Harumi went to?"

That Ulger would ultimately seek to break his promise had been a given to Masafumi, but the quickness of turnaround did rankle him, as Masafumi replied, "No. And if I may remind you—"

"Nope, I didden say you could say squat to me."

Masafumi watched as Ulger labored to pull on his shirt, offering no help to him as he struggled, other than to suggest, "A beer might make whatever pain comes later go away."

"Nah, I'm gonna get me some sake . . . and Harumi will be there to serve it to me, won't she?"

Harumi had said nothing about her post-tattooing plans, but he doubted that she would consider working another shift that night. Smiling, he said, "Perhaps she will be. You should go then?"

"Damn right . . . and I'm gonna show everyone there what I got goin' for me now. Teach 'em not to take me serious as a security guard. Once they see what I'm packing, they'll take me real serious. . . ."

With that, Ulger stepped out the door, but when Masafumi hurried over to peer through the sides of the drawn shades, he saw the enforcer wannabe ripping and tearing at his bandages, until they trailed over his shoulders like the fluttering tail of a squid.

It took all the resolve Masafumi had to resist the urge to follow the man into the restaurant, to watch the horrified reactions of those Japanese-reading patrons and workers when they saw what was nano-embroidered into Ulger's flesh . . . precisely drawn symbols for "I despise Japan and all that is Japanese" across his neck, or, if he managed to get his shirt off (or if it was removed for him), the phrase "I seek to defile all Japanese women" and "Death to Japanese men" on each shoulder, or the best ones of all along the bottom of each armpit: "I am worthless slime" and "I am unworthy to live."

Just as the long-ago Tokugawa shogunate inevitably spawned a far different, yet equally—if not far more—involved form of kimono decoration, so Masafumi decided that the current ban on non-police officers obtaining a suit of nano-body-armor should also trigger a more decorative, if less protective, variant. Using bundles of nano-ribbon, vat-dyed to a brilliant, unmissable shade of crimson, made the individual characters stand out vividly and unmistakably under Ulger's exposed flesh, much as embroidery stands out above that which is to be embroidered.

Patient, and sure in the knowledge that his creation would be seen and subsequently read, Masafumi busied himself cleaning up the shop, putting away bottles of ink, placing the used equipment in the autoclave, scrubbing down the chair Ulger had sat in, just in case any invisible blood mists should still be clinging to the vinyl surfaces, until he heard the ever-closer wail of the sirens. Be they police or an ambulance, it did not particularly matter to Masafumi.

That which he had been forced to create would soon be hidden, perhaps forever, either in a jail or in a morgue. But Harumi, and her growing collection of fleshy kimono, of close-fitting skin kosode, she would continue

to be seen, if she would allow Masafumi to augment her three-dimensional garment, once she learned of Ulger's inevitable fate.

Pedaling to his small apartment that night, he swerved just in time to avoid the chalked outline of a large, beefy body on the sidewalk in front of the Japanese restaurant not long before the real police had cordoned off the area with black-lettered yellow plastic tape. Preoccupied, Masafumi wondered which might be more suitable—an *osode* of finest gauze, or the more daring nano-fabric.

IV (Heian kosode)

"... what is a kimono ... if it ceases to be a thing worn?"

—Kunihiko Moriguchi, 2005

"When no one chooses to wear kimono, might they not choose to become the kimono?"

—Masafumi Saikaku (1999-2073)

From: "The Lives They Lived" ("Emperor of the Epidermal Kimono"),

Sunday, January 2074, The New York Times Magazine.

The next morning, Masafumi wasn't too surprised when Harumi didn't show up with her customary trays of *momengoshi*, ready for her hand-worked embellishment, but when Ignazio didn't show up for work either, he first grew puzzled, then . . . as he worked through each layer of their most recent words and actions, dwelling in particular on the seeming happenstance of their wants and needs, which managed to merge with his own artistic needs and wants, he became angry, shamed to the bone by their tandem deception, their dual interplay of common desire for him to act in their stead (the unspoken upset on Harumi's part, Ignazio's urgings to find out what was wrong, the revelation of their common foe . . . and Ignazio's sudden urge to play nano-Master to his unsuspecting Apprentice). But his anger washed away like unwanted dye from a resist painting when he ventured for the second time into the restaurant where Harumi had worked, past the dew-blurred chalk-outline of Ulger's body. One of the recent immigrant waitresses hurried over to him and said, "Harumi, she say for me to tell you something. She say thank you, and she hope you not angry at her and her boyfriend. She say, they cannot be free unless common enemy is gone. But they cannot be ones to stop enemy. She hopes you understand, and forgive. And she say, she love new *kosode*. When they come back, she want more. If you wish to make for her."

"Did she say . . . did they say where they are going?"

"Las Vegas. They have Skin Show there. She go show off *kosode*, tell

everyone you make. Oh, she also say to get rid of the ribbons, she say you know what mean. Okay? You have meal now?

"I'm not hungry—"

"Not hungry, is okay. I put in box later. Harumi, she pay ahead. She say serve you special dish . . . you sit, I go get," and so Masafumi sat, surrounded by scents and memories and distant sounds of cooking, until the waitress placed a plate of *kinugoshi* before him, and the scent of the deep-fried "silken" tofu filled his nostrils. As he picked up his chopsticks, he noticed in the dim light that there was a design, deeply branded, in the center of the slab of *kinugoshi*:

The ancient symbol for a kimono. . . .

Lifting the *oishii* treat to his lips, prior to savoring the warm custard-like interior, Masafumi decided that no matter what it might cost him, or how many free tattoos he might give that nanotech factory worker, he'd somehow get the thirteen yards worth of transparent nanofabric for Harumi's *osode* . . . under the circumstances, no other cloth would do. ○

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BATTLEFIELD GAMES

R. Neube

When I mentioned to R. Neube that his story would help kick off our thirtieth anniversary year, he remarked, "Geez, I can recall picking up that first copy at the Fayette Cigar Store. I was about to say it can't be that long ago, but it occurs to me that the building that replaced the store has also been torn down for something new." He also updates us with the following news: "For the sixth year, I made a presentation at the Governor's Scholarship Program, a collection of the cream of Kentucky's high schoolers. Weird addressing so many kids smarter than me, but I enjoy teaching them to run with scissors and how to invest their retirement funds in lottery tickets. I currently have a piece in a collection of novellas from Padwolf, 'Murder and Mayhem in the Godbox on a Million Dollars a Day.' "

"Hey, you. Yes, you, next to the fern stump."

I parted the camouflage netting covering my foxhole. The talkative cruise missile hovered a few meters from my position. Ducking, I rolled to the monitors. The sensors I had deployed across the river showed no advancing enemy. Nonetheless, I grabbed my weapon.

"If you are going to point a rifle at me," said the missile, "shoot. Get it over with."

Chagrined, I lowered my weapon. "Kinda be stupid to shoot five tons of explosives sitting on my doorstep." Kind of irritating that an alien cruise missile spoke better English than I did.

"Are you as bored as I am?"

"Machines get bored?"

The shape of the cruise missile reminded me of a bulgy human brain. General Li often ranted how the aliens played psych warfare games with us, the wrinkly brain imagery being another of their tricks. I was reassured seeing the missile had its defensive cannon pointed at the sun.

"Do you play chess?" asked the missile.

"I— Uh, General— Ha, you aren't going to trick me into giving you any information."

"I asked about chess, not for military secrets."

"Yes, I play. However I would have to get authorization from headquarters first. There are rules against fraternizing with the enemy."

"Humans have so many rules." The cruise missile sounded disappointed before it scooted down the Luchesa River valley.

I started to radio Command, then thought the missile's offer might be a ruse to have me call and reveal . . . Reveal what? Our frequencies? Our codes? The aliens already knew them by now. I hadn't a clue what my action might reveal to the enemy, but I decided my report could wait until I was relieved.

So, of course, Command buzzed me. The listening post to the west had reported my encounter with the enemy. Major Thurinsten seemed quite amused, granting me permission to play chess with any enemy missile, artillery shell, or land mine that came my way. Then she told me I should get comfortable because I was spending the rest of the week in my foxhole. Lest I grew bored playing games with enemy weapons, the major instructed me to excavate a trench ten meters long, connecting my foxhole with an old, water-filled shell hole behind my position.

"But my shovel is broken," I said.

"You're so highly trained, improvise."

"But that crater is a pond. It will flood my foxhole and the rest of the trench."

"Then drain the shell hole. Improvise."

I could feel the love.

The distant thunder of an artillery barrage accompanied my lunch. I felt grateful my sector remained quiet. Quiet Luchesa was where Command stuck all the fragments of units chopped up in battle. My last battalion had been shifted here after our weeklong adventure in an active sector; only ninety-one of us remained of the original nine hundred after fighting the alien Irlane and their machines for a few hundred meters of swamp. Gossip said Command wasn't going to rebuild my Fourth Hannigan after our mediocre performance.

The remainders of the Second Wongs, the Scots Heritage Foundation, the Fifty-Ninth Street Sisters, and the Pierpont Hockey Association Battalions were stationed here with us. (What possessed the colonists to give their units these names? Damned amateurs behaved like they were forming bowling leagues, not going to war.) Half the volunteer battalions on the northern front had been slaughtered this year. Our blood earned us this Luchesa vacation while the real soldiers from off-world dealt with the Irlane and their bored machines.

Real soldiers, I mused. Years of training and what good did it do me? I was the personal whipping boy for Major Thurinsten, despite my sergeant's stripes.

The thunder didn't quit. My stomach clenched as my imagination haunted me with memories of the times I had been huddled in a trench, waiting for the barrage to cease so we could charge the Irlane lines. Wait-

ing to die. I fetched my broken spade, harnessing my disquiet by working on my assigned trench.

The cruise missile's engines gave off an unmistakable hum, alerting me to its presence. Like something the size of a small house could be subtle. I clambered back to my foxhole, rubbernecking the whole way, half expecting to be whacked by an Irlane sniper.

"Have you received authorization to play chess?" asked the missile.

"Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Not really. I patrol and get my regular servicing at the depot. Until I encounter a proper target, that is my existence."

"Not much of an existence," I observed.

"Better than being my target."

I could almost hear the missile chuckle. Could a machine have a sense of humor?

I grumbled, "Last year, one of your peers made a 'proper target' of my original battalion while we were assembling for an assault. My lieutenant sent me back to her tent to get her binoculars. I popped over a rise, and there was a horrendous boom. Knocked me down. Which was fortunate, since it helped me escape all that flying debris. So I got transferred to this unit."

It had been my fourth day on the planet. We had flown a dozen light-years to win this war for the yokels, yet had never seen the enemy. Only a handful of my original battalion survived the detonation of the missile. Command deemed it wise to scatter us through the volunteer formations of this colonial world to spread our expertise.

"Is this a bad time?" asked the missile, snapping me from my stroll down nightmare lane.

"Naw, don't take my mood personally. I don't blame you. A missile can't help being a missile."

"Care to play some chess?"

"I knew the Irlane are crazy about chess, but it's weird they programmed you for it, too."

"I am not programmed. I learned the game during the flight to this world. The crew was very enthusiastic about their tournaments, so they activated some of us to play with them."

Why did the missile's voice sound so familiar? A holographic chessboard appeared beneath the missile; the pawns were humans. Psych warfare, I told myself. Two could play that game.

"What's your name? I can't call you Citizen Missile."

"Call me White." The king's pawn advanced.

Was it making fun of my albino-dyed skin? It had been so fashionable back home.

We played three quick games. I lost them all, due to trying to match the machine's speed. At the end of the third game, the missile abruptly flew to the west, cracking the sound barrier along the way.

I ducked, thinking its haste might be a prelude to an attack on my position. Scanned every centimeter of the boggy bank on the opposite side of the river for creeping aliens. Nothing.

Once again, distant explosions filled my ears. We were softening up the

Irlane lines thirty clicks away, yet White raced off in the opposite direction. What could that mean? I immediately typed up a report on my chip-plate, but could not bring myself to broadcast it to Command, still suspecting some kind of trick to crack our codes.

Late that night, a pair of grunts fetched me rations and more mines to deploy on my perimeter. They babbled about our offensive against Mount Benz launched at dusk. The Pierpont Hockey freaks had been withdrawn from our sector's reserve to join the distant attack. Since the other three Hannigan battalions were involved in the attack, rumor had it that our fragment of an unit was going to join them.

I sent back my chess report with them, along with a request for some decent digging tools.

Come morning, I got a long call from the major. She was thoroughly aggravated as usual. I got the distinct impression she thought I was filing bogus reports just to harass Command. The trench was now ordered to branch from the shell hole with two four-meter extensions forming a V toward the rear. As if we had the troops to fill them.

"How far have you gotten on the first trench?"

"Three meters."

"Only three meters? I hope this war isn't interfering with your nap time, Sergeant Crenna."

"My spade is broken."

"Stop playing games and start digging."

I played another game with the missile an hour before dawn. The holographic chess set was even more impressive in the dark, its pieces shimmering in silver and gold. Caution kept me in the shadows, worried an alien sniper might be waiting for me to silhouette myself against the glow. I slowed the play to human speed. Still lost, but I made a better showing.

Spent the day digging, courtesy of three separate bellows from the major. Seemed I was her special project, no doubt my reward for being overheard caviling against moronic amateurs like her leading these benighted volunteer battalions. Then again, the agricultural salesman turned quartermaster had "lost" a month's worth of our rations before being "promoted" by Command to lead this sector. I might have accepted the "loss" as incompetence, if Major Thurinsten hadn't started appearing in tailored uniforms and discussing her stock portfolio.

Then again, if there was a right place for a trained soldier, it was in a forward listening post. The colonial volunteers lacked the savvy to operate the intricate sensory net deployed on the opposite bank of the shallow river. And being far from the major's eagle eyes kept me out of further trouble.

The missile dropped by as the afternoon waned.

"It is a pity about your offensive," said my metallic buddy with that too familiar voice. Could it be mimicking a twentieth century actor?

Psych warfare, I reminded myself.

"Give me a min, Citizen Missile. Gotta check something."

Took the extra time to study my monitors. Nothing moved on the ene-

my's side of the river. However, I detected something moving on the distant slope behind me. Snatching my binoculars, I glimpsed a helmet. Since the insectile Irlane had exoskeletons, they didn't use helmets. So, my dear major had sent someone to spy on me.

"What did you say 'bout the attack?"

"It was an obvious move. Terrain and obstacles channeled your troops into our killing zone. It wasn't a fight, it was a slaughter."

Psych warfare.

"Perhaps it was meant to fail," I lied. "Daresay a pawn sacrifice was part of the general's plan."

The game started with my usual cautious deployment of my pieces. The missile attacked with a bishop-knight combination.

"Just out of curiosity, how much do you cost?" I asked.

"Twenty-four million Nok dollars at the current rate of exchange. Would you like that in another currency?"

"No, that's fine. Reckon they've got about two mill invested in me, though most of that was the cost of getting me to this godforsaken planet."

My pieces absorbed the damage from the missile's knight, then I launched a pointless sortie with my queen, catching a few pawns, rather than repairing my position by castling. The missile seemed nonplussed, growing more obsessed with attacking my vulnerable king, despite my queen raising hell. The missile couldn't focus; it blundered, losing a rook. Of course, when I finally did castle, my foe regained the tempo and beat me like a rug.

"Wait!" I shouted as the missile began to sidle west after checkmate. "I have a question."

My chess buddy shifted back in front of my foxhole. "Yes?"

"How does it feel to be expendable?" I wanted the machine to know humans could play the psych warfare game, too.

"I will be expended. That is my programming. I am not expendable. When I end, I will contribute to the war effort. Not before. Can you say the same?"

"Checkmate," I replied, thinking the major would sacrifice me without losing a minute's sleep.

"I can multitask," bragged the missile.

"I can dig like a mole," I responded.

The missile's nose cannon burped. I screamed, throwing myself deep into the hidey hole I had dug into the wall of my foxhole.

"I do not like spies watching my games," said the missile.

By the time I crawled from my foxhole, the phosphorus shells had ceased burning. The major's scout, as well as an entire stand of ferns in which he had hidden, smoldered.

I had the feeling I would spend the rest of the war filling out incident reports.

The major assigned me to the listening post for another month as my punishment. Sent me a stack of hardcopy chess games from Capablanca, two centuries old, but still the only chessmaster who confounded modern computers, according to pundits at headquarters.

Crawled out the next night and deployed my new mines across the river. A trick the Hannigan amateurs would have never sussed was the way I dug a hole and buried six rocket launchers after exhausting my store of duct tape to wrap them together. A hot wire to their triggers was simple to bury under a few centimeters of clay. Their muzzles were easy to mask with a thermal blanket and a few ferns. A professional noticed things like a missile's preferred hovering position.

The offensive had failed, but the tube freaks continued hurling boomers at Mount Benz. Were our generals getting kickbacks on the purchase of artillery shells?

With my next batch of rations, Command finally deigned to issue me a pick and unbroken shovel.

Couldn't sleep. So I continued the trench.

Took too many go pills. Spasmed in the mud during my overdose. But I recovered after a long nap. Or was it a short coma?

Major Thurinsten chewed me out the next day for sleeping too much.

My missile buddy arrived shortly after dark. It refused to hover over my rocket launcher trap.

I opened the match with a Ruy Lopez, knowing how the missile would respond. Whereupon, I threw out my knight at the absolute wrong moment. My foe could not compute, continuing with its attack on my king-side until my knight forked its king and queen. The brain-shaped vessel wobbled as it planned its next move—none would be good.

I grinned. This was how humans won. We might be faced with no good moves, but our imaginations could always go gonzo with the absolute wrong move.

I could count three ways to beat me.

A computer could not.

The missile drifted over my rocket launchers. I rammed my queen into its king's knight's pawn. Check. A sacrifice. Ducking into my hidey hole, I triggered the rocket launchers. Clenched my eyes shut, hoping the five tons of explosives would fail to detonate when I destroyed the missile wrapped around it.

The whoooooosh of the rockets.

The explosions.

Chunks of clay smacked onto my back and head. My hidey hole collapsed a second after I slithered free. I should have been digging deeper, instead of carving the major's trenches.

I felt the thump of the huge cruise missile hitting the riverbank. Cringed, waiting for the big blast. Nothing.

Grabbing my rifle for comfort, I peeked over the rim of my foxhole.

My chess buddy wallowed in the mud on the far side of the river, throwing water and muck. Its starboard engine had been hit. I fired three bullets into its primary sensor pod. Futile, but it was the only move I had.

Yet the missile rose. It flip-flopped like a politician, but it managed to rise above the muck.

I swallowed my stomach as it climbed into my throat. Ducked into my foxhole, wishing I was a better player, looking for a place to hide.

The damned machine said, "You win, I tip my king. You lose. There are one hundred and ninety-six rockets with fifty-kilo multiple warheads—Gleason Mark VIIIs, if I am not mistaken—flying toward me. Toward you. You are expendable. I will be expended, but not today."

I snaked from my foxhole. My chess buddy wobbled.

My rifle fell into the mud. "You win."

The missile wobbled forward until it almost touched my nose. Its port engine compensated for the damage caused by my rockets. The nose cannon emerged from the wrinkled skin, right above my head.

"What are you doing?"

The missile made a noise that might be laughter. "It will take weeks for the depot to repair my damage. You have extended my life. I will return the favor. Your rocket gambit was an inspired move. I admire a good player."

The cannon roared. The sheer noise knocked me down before the concussion could backwash me. Once a second the tube launched a shell into the sky. The gadget masters of the galaxy built cannons that could drop a shell atop a cockroach twenty clicks away, or blast a flying rocket at twice that distance.

My ears bled.

As I sat up inside my foxhole, a magnificent fireworks display colored the sky.

The brain skipped down the river, throwing great gouts of water into the air.

Sound filled the air. Familiar sounds. Command had launched a barrage at my position. Major Thurinsten had her ultimate revenge.

Except my chess partner had blown a Texas-sized hole through the flock of rockets. Still, I grabbed my shovel and started digging hard. They might not land atop me, but close counted with high explosives.

It was the best move I had. ○

PLACE MAT BY MOEBIUS

Place mat by Moebius:
wine bottled by Klein. You sigh.
This dinner never ends.

—Greg Beatty

Jeff Carlson's short fiction has appeared in venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *Space and Time*, and *Writers of the Future XXIV*. His first novel, *Plague Year*, will be published by Ace in August. He welcomes correspondence from readers at www.jverse.com. Jeff's great-grandmother was a Montana homesteader in the early 1890s, and his familiarity with the state comes in handy in his first story for *Asimov's*—a near-future thriller about a young woman who will have to draw upon her remarkable résumé to have any chance of surviving the . . .

GUNFIGHT AT THE SUGARLOAF PET FOOD & TAXIDERM

Jeff Carlson

Fortunately there was always one more moron coming down the road. Otherwise Julie would've had to find a real job, or move again, but she loved it here in Big Sky Country, as they bragged on their license plates—the high rolling plains, the slow winters and sweet, pungent summers. There was room to think.

Trolling for hotheads, drunks, and fools wasn't exactly big money, yet Julie enjoyed every minute of it. First there was the waiting, tucked away in the brush with her remote controls and a thermos of tea, letting her mind roam or whispering on the radio until some joker passed by in his gun-racked truck. Always a *him*. Usually tossing out Coors cans and cigarette butts. Cigarettes! In many ways the people here were a century behind the rest of the nation, and proud of it.

The little man in the sports car was a surprise.

As he sped around the turn, his headlights flashed over the silhouettes of Julie's deer standing in a meadow. Of course her beautiful beasts didn't run. Then his brakelights flared and he stepped out wearing a nice jacket, no hat. No lonesome country band thumping on an old cassette deck.

Julie had come north to escape labels and stereotypes, and recognized the irony of her thoughts. She wanted to be a better person. But the fact of the matter was that her victims tended toward a demographic particularly easy to reduce to cartoons: single syllable name, beer gut, filthy pants.

Shorty here did not fit the bill. Julie didn't think he was even driving an American car, given the low shape of it. Maybe an Audi. He looked like a suave TV villain there at the edge of his headlights, trim and spare—and barely five-foot-five.

When he pulled the compact Uzi submachine gun, Julie's headset distinctly said, "Oh no."

Julie froze, her left thumb jammed down on a button, her right hand still pulling on a joystick. In the meadow, the doe's tail twitched and twitched and twitched while the buck's head reared back so far that its antlers gouged its own spine. Any local would have jumped back in his truck.

Shorty opened fire on full auto. Both deer burst apart into flecks of real hide, white cotton stuffing and metal gears.

"Yeeeeeeehaw!" he screamed.

Already lying prone, Julie squashed her breasts so flat that they migrated into her armpits as the distinct snap of a bullet went overhead. Highsong had let her choose the location and set-up tonight, and her first priority was always to hunker down out of the line of fire. Way out. Some of the drunkards would make superb material for anti-NRA commercials, blasting away like they were Custer combating the Sioux Nation.

Shorty quit only when the buck's head winged away and its savaged body remained standing. He lowered his Uzi and gawked.

Typically the next stage of the game went smoothly. This wasn't west Miami. The Great White Poacher knew he'd been tricked, and humiliation doused his adrenaline. Highsong would crash out of the woods in a monster SUV, lights flashing, loudspeaker booming. The men about to be ticketed were often indignant, and enough California retirees had invaded the land that now the words *entrapment* and *lawyer* came on a regular basis, yet only twice had Julie seen somebody wave a rifle threateningly. Never had anyone actually taken aim. But they weren't packing machine guns.

"Uh, Highsong?" Julie whispered into the radio. She snuck a hand under her belly to see if she'd peed herself.

His voice was a groan: "What!"

"What're you gonna do?"

"We. What are we going to do. I don't know."

Shorty had finally twigged that a deer, like every other living thing, requires a head to stay on its feet. He cut glances left and right as he scuttled back to his car.

"It's a huge bust, don't just let him go." Now that she knew she was okay, Julie got mad. She didn't think of herself as sentimental, but Bongo the Buck out there had survived almost two dozen arrests and twenty-eight gun wounds, three arrows, and one rock. No more. Neither poor Bongo nor the doe, still too new to have a name, would ever do a job again.

Julie also felt a leaping tickle of excitement. This was way beyond the usual combination of trespassing and hunting out of season at \$238 a pop. This was the big time. She hissed, "You smash out onto the road like always and I'll back you—"

"Shut up and stay down."

"Highsong—"

"If you move I'll shoot you myself."

Julie fumbled for her binoculars and jotted down most of the license plate before the little man roared off.

He was headed straight into Sugarloaf.

Being the only black woman around for at least three states, as she liked to say, Julie Beauchain would have been notorious even if she wasn't a mad scientist. That made it easy to get dates, but she still freaked when total strangers addressed her as *Miz Boo-kane* or *Boy-shane*.

Julie did not prefer the hostile anonymity of urban life. It was just that her first thirty-six years of existence hadn't done much to teach her that human beings could be polite and neighborly and honest. Yes, this region was favored by white supremacists and had been the last refuge of the Unabomber, but in a head-to-head collision, Florida's battalions of drug lords, smugglers, militants, pimps, and psychos would barely break a sweat kicking butt on Montana's worst.

She liked the mountains. She still laughed at the way that so-called cities *ended*, fading into open country, unlike the gargantuan concrete sprawl of Miami-Dade. The police here let you out of a speeding ticket with five bucks paid on the spot, even for doing a hundred and ten on the ruler-straight highways—and you could forget to lock your car and still find your stash of five-dollar bills behind the sunvisor.

Highsong drove back into town sedately, not at all interested in catching up to the man with the machine gun. Julie squirmed on the bench seat of the 4x4 Suburban as the radio bled static. Finally the voice of Sheriff Tom came in answer, mumbling, "Haven't seen him, Bow-shane."

"He was headed right at you."

"Well I'm looking up and down main street right now."

Tom Young had never been enthusiastic about Fish, Wildlife, & Parks stationing a new unit locally. He seemed to view them as competition instead of as allies, and a few months ago he'd grown openly difficult. The silly pecker had gotten himself nabbed for hunting out of season, twice on the same day.

Julie felt certain that the sheriff's second shooting had been vindictive. Men would let pride get the best of their intelligence every time, as if deer could somehow mock them. Her small experiment in social conditioning was a total failure in that regard. Her decoys were cursed bitterly across

the state. Everyone knew. And yet each four-hour sting still averaged at least one bust. Some guys were simply too full of testosterone to pass up a target.

She tried to keep her voice calm, glancing at Highsong for approval. "Sheriff, there's only a few side roads between here and town. Why don't we each take a couple?"

As usual, the sheriff didn't answer immediately. Then: "Sounds like a goose chase to me, Bow-shane. There's lots more turn-offs than that. You just don't know the area."

"Neither does this guy, he's not local."

"Well we'll keep an eye out for that license plate."

"Sheriff . . ."

Highsong patted her knee and Julie let herself be distracted, looking down from the dark road ahead to her leg. Lately her weekday partner had grown chummy. Not in a brotherly way, she hoped. His hands were giant and scarred and always nimble with equipment, colored like cinnamon to her chocolate, and Julie had memorized an excessively poetic list of the places and ways she wanted to be touched.

She scooped away from Highsong on the long, bed-sized seat, tucking her own small hands into her lap where they couldn't do anything embarrassing. "Out," the sheriff mumbled against her crotch, and she slammed the square microphone back in its cradle.

Highsong might have smiled. Julie opened her mouth but then shut it, angry with herself for being flustered.

When the two of them were lying out there in the cool empty night, murmuring into each other's ear, she imagined her curves against his angles. She imagined being married twenty years. She and Highsong never babbled but they shared the obvious passions for wildlife, for hiking, for camping out. He was surprisingly obsessed with global politics and always asked about new developments in her work, and it was only on the drives back or sitting face-to-face over burgers and pie in noisy Mother's Tavern that they couldn't find any words.

Somehow that made her crush all the sweeter, and irritating as hell.

Even romance was different up here on the plains.

Back at her shop, unloading the remains of her deer in a cloud of cotton fiber, Julie sneezed directly into Highsong's face. "Oh jeez, I'm sorry!"

He mopped at his cheek, unflappable as always. "I needed a shower anyway."

"Sorry! Really. How about some coffee or something, I'll show you my new mini." That was not an innuendo. Over their five months working together, Julie had grown terrified of spooking him, because if Highsong was indeed courting her it was in some infinitely patient Indian way. She tried to be all business. "This is a hundred times better than the decoys, really, I took some of those little lawn gnomes—"

"Julie, it's late," he said. "Next time, okay?"

But he wiped at his face again as he stepped away.

* * *

She was too upset to stay home. Still, she knew better than to go hunting an Uzi-toting maniac by herself.

She drove out to Shaug Nurseries as the moon rose.

Their stings were typically set up on private land owned by Drew Shaug, partly because it was a challenge to find more than a foot or two that Shaug didn't own for miles in any direction, mostly because he didn't appreciate trigger-happy cowboys running around the same woods as his grandchildren. Julie couldn't wait to hear his thoughts on assault weaponry. Shaug was employer, landlord, or both to most of the local population, and no doubt he'd put a boot in Sheriff Tom's lazy backside.

From the highway, the lights of the nursery resembled a miniature city. She passed four gates before turning in, but Florida millionaires would have laughed at the Shaug residence. It was a plain ranch home within shouting distance of a sprawl of employee cabins, and the land in between was crowded with partially disassembled tractors.

Headlights rolled out to intercept her.

"Hey there, Boy-shane." Bob LaChapelle was Shaug's foreman and quite the charmer. His pickup truck was bigger than her pickup truck. Julie seemed to own the only small size Nissan ever sold in the state of Montana, and LaChapelle smiled down from the window of his giant Dodge Ram as they jawed like two riders out on the range.

"Mr. Shaug's buyin' seedlings in Europe," he said. "Want me to pass on a message?"

"Um, I guess not. Thanks."

She had already swung her truck around when she noticed an odd pattern of reflections in the dark window of Shaug's house. Looking back, she repressed the impulse to hit her brakes and then barely avoided steering into a ditch.

There was a vehicle on the jeep trail behind the garage, a car easing its way down with its headlights off—but its waxed hood glinted in the new light of the moon as it rocked back and forth.

Shorty's sports car.

Julie drove much further down the highway than she'd wanted to. The open road felt like a stage and she had to go more than a mile before a rocky knoll concealed her. She made a U-turn, switched off her lights, and then cruised back again, wondering how she'd stop without touching her brakes. She supposed she should have bashed out the taillights.

Her truck was personal property rather than an FW&P unit, so no radio. Highsong never answered when he was off-duty anyway. Typically he let his machine get the phone, too. Why? What was so important he couldn't be interrupted? She'd been to his trailer six times and had scrutinized the long living room and the kitchen especially for any sign of a woman's presence, but his home, so much like his face, was just too damn uncomplicated.

Julie let off the gas before she reached the north gate and turned in. Too fast. She yelped as her truck jolted through a pocket of mud, then yanked on the emergency brake. Finally she stopped. Her head thrummed with adrenaline.

She made too much noise rummaging through the mountain of boxes and bags in the truckbed, and stopped getting enough oxygen to think before she found what she wanted. That was okay. It was easier just to be muscle and a pair of eyes.

Most of the employee huts were dark. One seemed packed with people, talking too loud, laughing.

She came across Shorty's car in the shadows behind a row of greenhouses, its hood ticking as it cooled. He had actually kicked in his tail-lights, and Julie smiled to think of him cursing his way over the hills and through the woods. Someone who lived here must have shown him that back route. LaChapelle? The foreman might have been standing guard, waiting for Shorty. But why? What were they doing?

Julie blundered around the garage in time to be pinned by a slash of light spilling from the door of a double-wide trailer. Bond, James Bond. Two men stepped inside, one small, one regular. Good thing they didn't glance back. She must have been a heck of a sight, mincing along on tiptoe with her arms wrapped around the severed, long-necked heads of a doe and a trumpeter swan.

She wedged herself into the muddy shadows under the trailer, beneath the living room window, and forced herself to work slowly. She was using new gear for the first time and wanted this field test to be a success.

She raised the swan first, bumping the trailer's wall with its beak as she thrust its face up to the glass.

"—king pinhead, you're smoking it yourself!"

"Man, why don't you just relax."

Julie triple-checked the tape recorder she'd spliced into the wires falling from the swan's neck. Then she grinned. A swan's eyes were too small to be replaced with cameras that she could afford, so she'd plugged in high-gain microphones instead.

"Look at you." That was LaChapelle. "Look at your face all squinty and bloodshot. You know cTHC is *addictive*, right?"

"Just testing the product."

Shorty's voice was slower and deeper than she would've guessed, maybe because smoke had made his throat raw. Marijuana. THC was the drug in marijuana. Her brother had sucked it down the same way Mom soaked herself in rum and Coke.

Shorty said, "You wanna do business or what, man?"

"Do you? You almost got all of us shafted tonight playing Canuck Cowboy."

This just got better and better. Shorty was Canadian. Were they smuggling across the border? How much pot could you stuff into a sports car? It would make more sense just to grow it here, all these greenhouses, horticulture experts. . . .

Julie performed quick surgery on the doe's wiring while she pinned the base of the swan's neck between the trailer wall and the back of her head. Then every muscle in her neck seized up and she leaned away, clumsily grabbing the swan before it hit the ground. If LaChapelle looked out now he'd think she was putting on a puppet show.

The doe had nightvision camera-eyes, of course, which she'd spliced into a WatchMan recorder. Staring at the tiny screen in her lap, Julie lifted both animals again and zeroed in on the faint outlines behind the drapes.

"—even carrying a gun like that?"

"Wanna try it? Let's have a toke and go blow the tits off some stuff, buddy, you should see—"

"We're not buddies," LaChapelle said quietly. "We're business partners. And I think our other partners would be very, very unhappy to hear you're taking chances. And testing the product, you idiot, cTHC is addictive."

See THC. Canadian? Camouflaged. Cocaine. Cockamamie. Julie was too revved up to play Wheel of Fortune.

A bad ache knotted her shoulders again and she twisted her butt around in the dirt, trying to find a comfortable pose. It couldn't be done.

Shorty had what must be a briefcase and laid out several small items on the table, the first hot enough to show on infrared. A nifty little incubator. But LaChapelle gave him no money as far as she could tell, only paperwork, and Shorty muttered his way through a few lines: "The select crossbreeding resulting in concentrated THC has proved independent of the plus nitrogen fertilizer." He laughed. "You guys really think you're rocket scientists or something."

"Just bring it back to the lab, all right?"

Concentrated THC. They were retooling the plant to sink its teeth into people like tobacco or heroin.

Could Mr. Shaug know about this? He didn't need more money, that was for sure, and it didn't fit with his protectiveness of his family. . . . LaChapelle and some cronies were probably looking to cash in on the side. Julie wondered why they were using a lab across the border, but it must be tough to find people with the right training, especially out in the middle of nowhere.

Busting an international biotech drug ring! She was going to be absolutely *buried* in venture capital money, and she couldn't wait to see the look on Sheriff Tom's face when the grumpy old boob realized she was his best friend in the world.

She was going to have to let him in on the glory.

Despite its fabulous name, the Sugarloaf Pet Food & Taxidermy was merely a three-room cabin set beside a warehouse in a dirt lot graced with two trees and a sagging fence. By rights the place should have been named something more along the lines of Beauchain Security, but Julie hadn't thought it prudent yet to draw that sort of attention. In any case it was Highsong who'd christened her shop, with mischief in his often unreadable dark eyes, and Julie had blown a hundred and forty bucks getting a sign made in the hope that he might feel a possessive twinge each time he picked her up.

She did not sell pet supplies. Highsong was a tease. He found it amusing that she had six bird feeders and threw snacks to every mutt in town,

yet packed her warehouse with armies of dead beasts. Most of it was FW&P work, of course, although she did perform some regular taxidermy. The work paid decent money and also generated good will among the townies she'd busted.

Tonight her cabin seemed stuffy, too small. It had been one wild ride of a day—a new day now; it was twenty minutes after midnight—but things had ended well. Sheriff Tom had goggled at her recordings and actually stammered *thanks*. He said he'd go straight to the nursery as soon as the state police arrived. He also warned her that she stood some chance of trouble herself, having no authority, no warrant, but Julie pulled her tapes out of his hands and told him to say he received an anonymous tip. Big deal. The man really was dense sometimes.

Heading home, she'd considered a drive out to Highsong's place with a six-pack to celebrate. But what if he wasn't alone?

She was putting water on for tea when twin lights flashed across her window, then again. She leaned over the hot stove to peek out. Speeding into her lot was a sports car, *the* sports car, followed by the sheriff's hard-top jeep.

"God, no," Julie said.

Too late it all made sense. Idiot. How else could LaChapelle have known that Shorty machine-gunned her decoys?

Now she had maybe twelve seconds before they got inside, and used three grabbing her phone and punching 911. Then she wasted two more realizing that calling the cops might not be the best idea. What if all six members of the Sugarloaf sheriff's unit were in on the deal?

The slam of car doors felt like malfunctions in her heart and Julie forgot to think again as gunfire blew through her front door, right over her head.

Originally she'd drawn up the killer lawn gnomes as a gag. In Florida, however, people crammed their yards with shiny plastic flamingos and miniature windmills and such. She'd realized there could be a paying market—and a trio of elves stood on her coffee table because she thought she might lure Highsong inside for a little show-and-tell.

Julie dove back behind her kitchen counter as Shorty kicked through the door. He looked down at the weird greeting party he discovered inside, then snorted and started to kick at them.

The first elf misfired, its jaunty green cap rocketing off to the left. The second either aimed or launched poorly. Its taser-leads bit into the sofa with a flash of white electricity, at least twenty inches off-target.

The third elf rammed its juice home directly over Shorty's heart. His chest seemed to explode into ashes.

Julie screamed, expecting buckets of blood. An instant later, though, her cabin was saturated in tasty blue smoke. He must have been carrying a personal stash in his pocket.

He toppled like Goliath onto the ceramic elves.

Coughing and wheezing, Julie rose from her hiding place and ran for the back door. Her feet felt huge, weightless, like soft balloons pushing her skyward. She was looking down at them when her face encountered the door and then her butt met the linoleum.

Oh jeez I'm totally schnocked! she realized, and sat there owlshly counting her own thoughts.

The sound of two gunshots slapped her like her mother's palm. She pushed herself upright. But the small, neat holes in the door stopped her again. *Just missed.* When she looked around her vision seemed dim—they were shadows thrashing toward her in great swimming motions and everyone was yelling.

Suddenly she was outside, wrapped in fogbanks of smoke. Then she could see again. The stars glittered and the chill air felt exquisite on her neck. She made sense of the fact that she was wearing only floppy socks and knew she couldn't run all the way back to Florida. She sprinted toward her warehouse instead.

"Goddamn goddamn goddamn!" Sheriff Tom chanted behind her.

She slammed the door on his anger and dropped to her hands and knees, sensing bullets like she had radar. Her consciousness felt huge and sensitive and vulnerable, as if every hair on her head had been squeezed full of brains like toothpaste.

She rolled right, then popped up beside a work table as the door crashed open with a resounding metal gong. The vibration felt so intense that her fingers wouldn't close on the master remote she wanted. Groping for it through the jumble of tools and wiring, she cut herself on a bandsaw and that raw hurt was the promise of death.

But LaChapelle wasn't handling the smoke well either. He went completely bug-nuts, and started shooting away from her.

Shooting her pets.

The black bear's only moving parts were its neck and one foreleg, yet, even positioned on all fours, it was nearly as tall as a man, a hulk of claws and teeth. Shotgun blasts echoed through the warehouse. Then she activated the rest of her toys and Sheriff Tom also opened fire, shrieking in fear.

Julie had not invented the robo-decoys. That honor went to a Wisconsin taxidermist. She had, however, made improvements as word got round and poachers grew wary.

The migratory elk were capable of walking stiffly and waddled forward in a slow-motion stampede, bumping and bonking each other. Julie realized with surprising passion that she had to take them to Hollywood—here's the pitch, live-action Bambi crossed with Night of the Living Dead. They formed a shaggy wall of muscle from which Sheriff Tom and LaChapelle could only blast meaningless, fist-sized hunks.

High in the rafters, a mass of shadows flopped and twitched.

She'd run out of working space in autumn, when gun lovers were permitted to kill beautiful fuzzy things and her decoys had to be put away. And in winter, Fish, Wildlife & Parks focused more on maintaining habitats than on trapping the few hunters enthusiastic enough to brave the elements.

Her birds nested on sheets of plywood laid across the open rafters—and her turkeys and sage grouse could all walk. The lone bald eagle and platoon of ring-necked pheasants could all open both wings. They carried the immobile owls, cranes, and swans to the edge.

It was Biblical, a rain of fowl.

Most of the palsied horde crashed down upon the elk or her work tables, but enough hit their targets that Sheriff Tom vanished from sight and LaChapelle was driven to his knees, hacking on old dry feathers.

He put one last shot into the ceiling as Julie charged in for the *coup de grace*, high-stepping through the flapping mess. She brained LaChapelle with a duck and kicked him four times for good measure, then drove her bruised knee into Sheriff Tom's belly when she was bumped from behind by an elk still diligently marching its way forward.

The paramedic kept pressing his thumb down on the skin beneath Julie's eyes, checking her pupil response to see if she was concussed. She had repeatedly lost track of what she was saying, fascinated by the blizzard of red and blue lights. The confusion of emergency vehicles and personnel seemed roughly equal to the congestion inside her stoned brain.

"Look up," the paramedic kept saying. "Can you look up?"

"Let's go over it again," the state trooper said. "They followed you into the warehouse. . . ."

"Right," Julie tried to point and nearly fell over. She'd squeezed three industrial-size tubes of epoxy over the pile of robo-fowl, binding LaChapelle and Sheriff Tom into a surreal cake of beaks and bodies that would have to be taken apart with a power sander, no doubt painfully. As for Shorty, she had simply hit him with the taser again because she was unable to tie him up, having unfortunately glued her right hand to her own hip.

She gestured with her chin instead and saw Highsong among the milling uniforms. His head was also turning, searching, and Julie's first impulse was to hide. She was very aware of her own sour adrenaline breath and lumpy hair—but with the sudden clarity of the smoke, Julie understood that this might be her best and only chance.

He spotted her as soon as she started toward him, shuffling. Then his eyebrows went up. Did she look even worse than she thought?

Julie was confrontational. "So what was so important you couldn't even come in for a cup of coffee earlier?"

He hesitated, then grinned and shrugged, an expansive motion that was unlike him. "Left-over tacos and a two volume biography of Eisenhower," he said.

"What?"

"I just didn't think we should rush things."

Julie stepped closer and Highsong brought his open arms in, enfolding her. When she kissed him, he kissed back. ○

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TRUNK AND DISORDERLY

Charles Stross

Charles Stross has been in rehab since 2004, recovering from the bad attack of singularitis that led to the *Accelerando* outbreak. His doctors report that he is much improved since the excision of his dot-com gland, and may eventually be capable of writing normal SF again, under suitably controlled circumstances, although he is unlikely ever to return to his previous proto-Ballardian normality. The following story was discovered cunningly encoded in a scarf he was crocheting at the clinic; we believe it may cast some light on his illness.

1. In Which Laura Departs and Fiona Makes a Request

“I want you to know, darling, that I’m leaving you for another sex robot—and she’s twice the man you’ll ever be,” Laura explained as she flounced over to the front door, wafting an alluring aroma of mineral oil behind her.

Our arguments always began like that: this one was following the script perfectly. I followed her into the hall, unsure precisely what cue I’d missed this time. “Laura—”

She stopped abruptly, a faint whine coming from her ornately sculpted left knee. “I’m leaving,” she told me, deliberately pitching her voice in a modish mechanical monotone. “You can’t stop me. You’re not paying my maintenance. I’m a free woman, and I don’t have to put up with your moods!”

The hell of it is, she was right. I’d been neglecting her lately, being overly preoccupied with my next autocremation attempt. “I’m terribly sorry,” I said. “But can we talk about this later? You don’t have to walk out right this instant—”

"There's nothing to talk about." She jerked into motion again, reaching for the door handle. "You've been ignoring me for months, darling: I'm sick of trying to get through to you! You said last time that you'd try not to be so distant, but look how that turned out." She sighed and froze the pose for a moment, the personification of glittering mechanistic melodrama. "You didn't mean it. I'm sick of waiting for you, Ralph! If you really loved me you'd face up to the fact that you're an obsessive-compulsive, and get your wetware fixed so that you could pay me the attention I deserve. Until then, I'm out of here!"

The door opened. She spun on one chromed stiletto heel, and swept out of my life in a swish of antique Givenchy and ozone.

"Dash it all, not again!" I leaned my forehead against the wall. "Why now, of all times?" Picking a fight then leaving me right before a drop was one of her least endearing habits. This was the fifth time. She usually came back right afterward, when she was loose and lubed from witnessing me scrawl my butchness across the sky, but it never failed to make me feel like an absolute boulder at the time; it's a low blow to strike a cove right before he tries to drill a hole in the desert at mach twenty-five, what? But you can't take femmes for granted, whether they be squish or clankie, and her accusation wasn't, I am bound to admit, entirely baseless.

I wandered into the parlor and stood between the gently rusting ancestral space suits, overcome by an unpleasant sense of aimless tension. I couldn't decide whether I should go back to the simulator and practice my thermal curves again—balancing on a swaying meter-wide slab of ablative foam in the variable dynamic forces of atmospheric re-entry, a searing blow-torch flare of hot plasma surging past, bare centimeters beyond my helmet—or get steaming drunk. And I hate dilemmas; there's something terribly non-U about having to actually *think* about things.

You can never get in too much practice before a freestyle competition, and I had seen enough clowns drill a scorched hole in the desert that I was under no illusions about my own invincibility, especially as this race was being held under mortal jeopardy rules. On the other hand, Laura's walk-out had left me feeling unhinged and unbalanced, and I'm never able to concentrate effectively in that state. Maybe a long, hot bath and a bottle of sake would get me over it so I could practice later; but tonight was the pre-drop competitors' dinner. The club prefers members to get their crashing and burning done before the race—something to do with minimizing our third-party insurance premium, I gather—so it's fried snacks all round, then a serving of rare sirloin, and barely a drop of the old firewater all night. So I was perched on the horns of an acute dilemma—to tipple or topple as it were—when the room phone cleared its throat obtrusively.

"Ralph? Ralphie? Are you all right?"

I didn't need the screen to tell me it was Fiona, my half-sister. Typical of her to call at a time like this. "Yes," I said wearily.

"You don't sound it!" she said brightly. Fi thinks that negative emotions are an indicator of felonious intent.

"Laura just walked out on me again and I've got a drop coming up tomorrow," I moaned.

"Oh Ralphie, stop angsting! She'll be back in a week when she's run the script. You worry too much about her, she can look after herself. I was calling to ask, are you going to be around next week? I've been invited to a party Geraldine Ho is throwing for the downhill cross-country skiing season on Olympus Mons, but my house-sitter phoned in pregnant unexpectedly and my herpetologist is having another sex change so I was just hoping you'd be able to look after Jeremy for me while I'm gone, just for a couple of days or maybe a week or two—"

Jeremy was Fiona's pet dwarf mammoth, an orange-brown knee-high bundle of hairy malevolence. Last time I'd looked after Jeremy he puked in my bed—under the duvet—while Laura and I were hosting a formal orgy for the Tsarevitch of Ceres, who was traveling incognito to the inner system because of some boring edict by the Orthodox Patriarch condemning the fleshpits of Venus. Then there's the time Jeremy got at the port, then went on the rampage and ate Cousin Branwyn's favorite skirt when we took him to Landsdown Palace for a weekend with Fuffy Morgan, even though we'd locked him in one of the old guard towers with a supply of whatever it is that dwarf mammoths are supposed to eat. You really can't take him anywhere—he's a revolting beast. Not to mention an alcoholic one.

"Must I?" I asked.

"Don't whine!" Fi said brightly. "Nobody will ever take you seriously if you whine, Ralphie. Anyway, you owe me a favor. Several favors, actually. If I hadn't covered up for you that time when Boris Oblomov and you got drunk and took Uncle Featherstonehaugh's yacht out for a spin around the moon without checking the anti-matter reserve in the starboard gravity polarizer. . . ."

"Yes, Fi," I said wearily, when she finally let me get a word in edgewise: "I surrender. I'll take Jeremy. But I don't promise I'll be able to look after him if I die on the drop. You realize it's under mortal jeopardy rules? And I can't guarantee I'll be able to protect him from Laura if she shows up again running that bestiality mod your idiot pal Larry thought it would be a good idea to install on her when she was high on pink noise that time—"

"That's enough about Larry," Fi said in a voice dripping liquid helium. "You know I'm not walking out with him any more. You'll look after Jeremy for two weeks and that's enough for me. He's been a little sulky lately but I'm sure you'd know all about *that*. I'll make certain he's backed up first, then I'll drop him off on my way to São Paolo skyport, right?"

"What ho," I said dispiritedly, and put the phone down. Then I snapped my fingers for a chair, sat down, and held my head in my hands for a while. My sister was making a backup of her mammoth's twisted little psyche to ensure Jeremy stayed available for future torments: nevertheless she wouldn't forgive me if I killed the brute. Femmes! U or non-U, they're equally demanding. The chair whimpered unhappily as it massaged my tensed-up spine and shoulders, but there was no escaping the fact that I was stressed-out. Tomorrow was clearly going to be one of those days, and I hadn't even scheduled the traditional post-drop drink with the boys yet. . . .

2. The New Butler Calls

I was lying on the bottom of the swimming pool in the conservatory at the back of Chateau Pookie, breathing alcohol-infused air through a hose and feeling sorry for myself, when the new butler found me. At least, I think that's what I was doing. I was pretty far-gone, conflicted between the need to practice my hypersonic p-wagging before the drop and the urge to drink Laura's absence out of my system. All I remember is a vague rippling blue curtain of sunlight on scrolled ironwork—the ceiling—and then a huge stark shadow looming over me, talking in the voice of polite authority.

"Good afternoon, Sir. According to the diary, Sir is supposed to be receiving his sister's mammoth in the front parlor in approximately twenty minutes. Would Sir care to be sober for the occasion? And what suit should Sir like to wear?"

This was about four more sirs than I could take lying down. "Nnnngk gurgle," I said, sitting up unsteadily. The breather tube wasn't designed for speech. Choking, I spat it out. "M'gosh and please excuse me, but who the hell are you?"

"Alison Feng." She bowed stiffly, from the waist. "The agency sent me, to replace your last, ah, man." She was dressed in the stark black and white of a butler, and she did indeed have the voice—some very expensive training, not to mention discreet laryngeal engineering, went into producing that accent of polite condescension, the steering graces that could direct even the richest and most irritable employer in directions less conducive to their social embarrassment. But—

"You're my new butler?" I managed to choke out.

"I believe so." One chiseled eyebrow signaled her skepticism.

"Oh, oh jolly good, then, that squishie." A thought, marinating in my sozzled subconscious, floated to the surface. "You, um, know why my last butler quit?"

"No, sir." Her expression didn't change. "In my experience it is best to approach one's prospective employers with an open mind."

"It was my sister's mammoth's fault," I managed to say before a fit of coughing overcame me. "Listen, just take the bloody thing and see it's locked in the number three guest dungeon, the one that's fitted out for clankie doms. It can try'n destroy anything it bally likes in there, it won't get very far an' we can fix it later. *Hic*. Glue the door shut, or weld it or something—one of her boyfriends trained the thing to pick locks with its trunk. Got a sober-up?"

"Of course, sir." She snapped her fingers, and blow me if there wasn't one of those devilish red capsules balanced between her white-gloved digits.

"Ugh." I took it and dry-swallowed, then hiccupped. "Fiona's animal tamer'll probably drop the monster off in the porch but I'd better get up—'n'case sis shows." I hiccupped again, acid indigestion clenching my stomach. "Urgh. Wossa invitation list for tonight?"

"Everything is perfectly under control," my new butler said, a trifle pa-

tronizingly. "Now if Sir would care to step inside the dryer while I lay out his suit—"

I surrendered to the inevitable. After all, once you've accepted delivery of a dwarf mammoth on behalf of your sister nothing worse can happen to you all day, can it?

Unfortunately, I was wrong. Fiona's chauffeuse did indeed deposit Jeremy, but on a schedule of her own choosing. She must have already been on the way as Fi was nattering on the blower. While Miss Feng was introducing herself, she was sneakily decanting the putrid proboscidean into the ornamental porch via her limousine's airlock. She accomplished this with stealth and panache, and made a successful retreat, but not before she completed my sister's act of domestic sabotage by removing the frilly pink restraining rope that was all that kept Jeremy from venting his spleen on everything within reach. Which he commenced to do all over great-uncle Arnold's snooker table, which I was only looking after while he was out-system on business. It was the triumphant squeaking that clued me in that we had problems—normally Jeremy manages to achieve a preternaturally silent approach while he sneaks up on one with mischief in what passes for his mind—as I headed toward the stairs to my dressing room.

"Help me," I said, gesturing at the porch, from which a duet for Hell's piccolo and bull in a china shop was emanating.

The butler immediately rose in my estimation by producing a bolas. "Would this serve?" she asked.

"Yes. Only he's a bit short for a mammoth—"

Too late. Miss Feng's throw was targeted perfectly, and it would have succeeded if Jeremy had been built to the scale of a typical pachyderm. Alas, the whirling balls flew across the room and tangled in the chandelier while Jeremy, trumpeting and honking angrily, raised his tusks and charged at my kneecaps. "Oh dear," said the new butler.

I blinked and began to move. I was too slow, the sober-up still fighting the residual effects of the alcohol in my blood. Jeremy veered toward me, tusks raised menacingly to threaten the old family jewels. I began to turn, and was just raising my arms to fend off the monster (who appeared dead-set on editing the family tree to the benefit of Fiona's line) when Miss Feng leaned sideways and in one elegant gesture ripped the ancient lace curtains right off the rail and swiped them across my assailant's tusks.

The next minute remains, mercifully, a confused blur. Somehow my butler and I mammoth-handled the kicking and struggling—not to mention squealing and secreting—Jeremy up the rear staircase and into the second best guest suite's dungeon. Miss Feng braced herself against the door while I rushed dizzily to the parlor and returned with a tube of InstaSteel Bulkhead Bond, with which we reinforced the stout oak partition. Finally my stomach rebelled, quite outraged by the combination of sober-up and adrenaline, at which point Miss Feng diffidently suggested I proceed to the master bathroom and freshen up while she dealt with the porch, the pachyderm, and my suit in descending order of priorities.

By the time I'd cleaned up, Miss Feng had laid a freshly manufactured

suit for me on the dresser. "I took the liberty of arranging for a limousine to your club, sir," she said, almost apologetically. "It is approaching eighteen o'clock: one wouldn't want to be late."

"Eighteen—" I blinked. "Oh dear, that's dashed awkward."

"Indeed." She watched me cautiously. "Ah, about the agency—"

I waved my hand dismissively. "If you can handle Jeremy I see no reason why you couldn't also handle great-uncle Arnold when he gets back from Proxima Tau Herpes or wherever he's gone. Not to mention the Dread Aunts, bless 'em. Assuming, that is, you want the job—"

Miss Feng inclined her head. "Certainly one is prepared to assume the role for the duration of the probationary period." *Sotto voce* she added, almost too quietly for me to catch: "although continuing thereafter presupposed that one or both of us survives the experience. . . ."

"Well, I'm glad that's sorted." I sniffed. "I'd better trot! If you could see the snooker table goes for repair and look to the curtains, I'll be off, what-what?"

"Indeed sir." She nodded as if about to say something else, thought better of it, and then held the door open for me. "Good night, sir."

3. The Dangerous Drop Club

I spent the evening at the Dangerous Drop Club, tackling a rather different variety of dangerous drop from the one I'd be confronting on the morrow. I knew perfectly well at the time that this was stupid (not to mention rash to the point of inviting the attention of the Dread Aunts, those intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic), but I confess I was so rattled by the combination of Laura's departure, my new butler's arrival, and the presence of the horrible beast in room two that for the life of me I simply couldn't bring myself to engage in any activity more constructive than killing my own brain cells.

Boris Kaminski was present of course, boasting in a low-key manner about how he was going to win the race and buying everyone who mattered—the other competitors, in other words—as many drinks as they would accept. That was his prerogative, for, as the ancients would put it, there's no prize for second place; he wasn't the only one attempting to seduce his comrades into suicide through self-indulgence. "We fly tomorrow, chaps, and some of us might not be coming back! Crack open the vaults and sample the finest vintages. Otherwise you may never know. . . ." Boris always gets a bit like that before a drop, morbidly maudlin in a gloating kind of way. Besides, it's a good excuse for draining the cellars, and Boris's credit is good for it—"Kaminski" is not his real name but the name he uses when he wants to be a fabulously rich playboy with none of the headaches and anxieties that go with his rank. This evening he was attired in an outrageous outfit modeled on something Tsar Putin the First might have worn when presiding over an acid rave in the barbaric dark ages before the re-enlightenment. He'd probably found it in the back of his big brother's wardrobe.

"We know you only want to get us drunk so you can take unfair advantage of us," joshed Tolly Forsyth, raising his glass of Chateau !Kung, "but I say let's drink a toast to you! Feet cold and bottoms down."

"Glug glug," buzzed Toadsworth, raising a glass with his telescoping sink-plunger thingie. Glasses were ceremoniously drained. (At least, that's what I think he said—his English is rather sadly deficient, and one of the rules of the club is: no neural prostheses past the door. Which makes it a bit dashed hard when you're dealing with fellows who can't tell a fuck from a frappé I can tell you, like some high-bandwidth clankie heirs, but that's what you get for missing out on a proper classical education, undead languages and all, say I.) Goblets were ceremonially drained in a libation to the forthcoming toast race.

"It's perfectly all right to get *me* drunk," said Marmaduke Bott, his monocle flashing with the ruby fire of antique stock-market ticker displays: "I'm sure I won't win, anyway! I'm sitting this one out in the bleachers."

"Drink is good," agreed Edgestar Wolfblack, injecting some kind of hideously fulminating fluorocarbon lubricant into one of his six knees. Most of us in the club are squishies, but Toadsworth and Edgestar are both clankies. However, while the Toadster's knobbly conical exterior conceals what's left of his old squisher body, tucked decently away inside his eye-turret, Edgestar has gone the whole hog and uploaded himself into a ceramic exoskeleton with eight or nine highly specialized limbs. He looks like the bastard offspring of a multi-tool and a mangabot. "Carbon is the new—" his massively armored eyebrows furrowed—"black?" He's a nice enough chappie and he went to the right school, but he was definitely at the back of the queue the day they were handing the cortical upgrades out.

"Another wee dram for me," I requested, holding out my snifter for a passing bee-bot to vomit the nectar into. "I got a new butler today," I confided. "Nearly blew it, though. Sis dumped her pet mammoth on me again and the butler had to clean up before I'd even had time to fool her into swearing the oath of allegiance."

"How totally horrible," Abdul said in a tone that prompted me to glance at him sharply. He smirked. "And how is dear Fiona doing this week? It's ages since she last came to visit."

"She said something about the Olympic skiing season, I think. And then she's got a few ships to launch. Nothing very important aside from that, just the après ski salon circuit." I yawned, trying desperately to look unimpressed. Abdul is perhaps the only member of the club who genuinely out-ranks Boris. Boris is constrained to use a *nom de guerre* because of his position as heir to the throne of all the Russias—at least, all the Russias that lie between Mars and Jupiter—but Abdul doesn't even bother trying to disguise himself. He's the younger brother of his Excellency the Most Spectacularly Important Emir of Mars, and when you've got that much clout you get to do whatever you want. Especially if it involves trying to modify the landscape at mach twenty rather than assassinating your elder siblings, the traditional sport of kings. Abdul is quite possibly certifiably insane, having graduated to orbital freestyle re-entry surfing by way of technical diving on Europa and naturist glacier climbing on Pluto—and he doesn't even have my unfortunate neu-

roendocrine disorder as an excuse—but he's a fundamentally sound chappie at heart.

"Hah. Well, we'll just have to invite her along to the party afterward, won't we?" He chuckled.

"Par-ty?" Toadsworth beeped up.

"Of course. It'll be my hundredth drop, and I'm having a party." Abdul smirked some more—he had a very knowing smirk—and sipped his eighty-year Inverteuchtie. "Everyone who survives is invited! Bottoms up, chaps?"

"Bottoms up," I echoed, raising my glass. "Tally ho!"

4. The Sport of Kings

The day of the drop dawned bright and cold—at least it was bright and cold when I went out on the balcony beside the carport to suit up for my ride.

Somewhat to my surprise, Miss Feng was already up and waiting for me with a hot flask of coffee, a prophylactic sober-up, and a good-luck cigar. "Is this competition entirely safe, Sir?" she enquired as I chugged my espresso.

"Oh, absolutely not," I reassured her: "but I'll feel much better afterward! Nothing like realizing you're millimeters away from flaming meteoritic death to get the old blood pumping, what?"

"One couldn't say." Miss Feng looked doubtful as she accepted the empty flask. "One's normal response to incendiary situations that get the blood pumping is a wound dressing and an ambulance. Or to keep the employer from walking into the death trap in the first place. Ahem. I assume Sir *intends* to survive the experience?"

"That's the idea." I grinned like an idiot, feeling the familiar pulse of excitement. It takes a lot to drive off the black dog of depression, but dodging the bullet tends to send it to the kennels for a while. "By the way, if Laura calls could you tell her I'm dying heroically to defend her virtue or something? I'll see her after—oh, that reminds me! Abdul al-Matsumoto has invited us—all the survivors, I mean—to a weekend party at his place on Mars. So if you could see that the gig is ready to leave after my drop as soon as I've dressed for dinner, and I don't suppose you could make sure there's a supply of food for the little monster, could you? If we leave him locked in the garret dungeon he can't get into trouble, not beyond eating the curtains—"

Miss Feng cleared her throat and looked at me reproachfully. "Sir *did* promise his sister to look after the beast in person, didn't he?"

I stared at her, somewhat taken aback. "Dash it all, are you implying. . . ?"

Miss Feng handed me my pre-emptive victory cigar. She continued, in a thoughtful tone of voice: "Has Sir considered that it might be in his best interests—should he value the good opinion of his sister—to bring Jeremy along? After all, Lady Fiona's on Mars, too, even if she's preoccupied with the après ski circuit. If by some mischance she were to visit the

Emir's palace and find Sir sans Jeremy it might be more than trivially embarrassing."

"Dash it, you're right. I suppose I'll have to pack the bloody pachyderm, won't I? What a bore. Will he fit in the trunk?"

Miss Feng sighed, very quietly. "I believe that may be a remote theoretical possibility. I shall endeavor to find out while Sir is enjoying himself not dying."

"Try beer," I called as I picked up my surfboard and climbed aboard the orbital delivery jitney. "Jeremy loves beer!" Miss Feng bowed as the door closed. *I hope she doesn't give him too much*, I thought. Then the gravity squirrelizer chattered to itself angrily, decided it was on the wrong planet, and tried to rectify the situation in its own inimitable way. I lay back and waited for orbit. I wasn't entirely certain of the wisdom of my proposed course of action—there are few predicaments as grim as facing a mammoth with a hangover across the breakfast table—but Miss Feng seemed like a competent sort, and I supposed I'd just have to trust her judgment. So I took a deep breath, waited another sixty seconds (until the alarm chimed), then opened the door and stepped off the running board over three hundred kilometers of hostile vacuum.

The drop went smoothly—as I suppose you guessed, or I wouldn't be here to bend your ear with the story, what? The adrenaline rush of standing astride a ten centimeter thick surfboard as it bumps and vibrates furiously in the hypersonic air-flow, trying to throw you off into the blast-furnace tornado winds of re-entry, is absolutely indescribable. So is the sight of the circular horizon flattening and growing, coming up to batter at your feet with angry fists of plasma. Ah, what rhapsody! What delight! I haven't got a poetic bone in my body, but when you tap into Toadsworth outside of the club-house's suppressor field that's the kind of narcotic drivel he'll feed you. I think he's a jolly good poet, for an obsessive-compulsive clankie with a staircase phobia and knobbly protrusions; but, at any rate, a more accurate description of competitive orbital re-entry diving I haven't heard from anyone recently.

A drop doesn't take long. The dangerous stage lasts maybe twenty minutes from start to finish, and only the last five minutes is hot. Then you slow to sub-sonic velocity and let go of your smoldering surfboard, and pray to your ancestors that your parachute is folded smartly, because it would be mortifying to have to be rescued by the referee's skiff. Especially if they don't get to you until after you complete your informal enquiry into lithobraking, eh?

There was a high overcast as I came hurtling in across Utah, and I think I might have accidentally zipped instead of zagging a little too firmly as I tried to see past a wall of cloud ahead and below me, because when my fireball finally dissipated I found myself skidding across the sky about fifty kilometers off course. This would be embarrassing enough on its own, but then my helmet helpfully highlighted three other competitors—Abdul among them!—who were much closer to the target zone. I will confess I muttered an unsportingly rude word at that juncture, but the game's the thing and it isn't over 'til it's over.

In the end I touched down a mere thirty-three thousand meters off-

base, and a couple of minutes later the referees ruled I was third on target. Perry O'Peary—who had been leading me—managed to make himself the toast of the match before he reached the tropopause by way of a dodgy ring seal on his left knee. Dashed bad play, that, but at least he died with his boots on—even if they were glowing red-hot and welded to his ankles.

I caught a lift the rest of the way to the drop base from one of the referee skiffs. As I tromped across the dusty desert floor in my smoldering armor, feeling fully alive for the first time in weeks, I found the party already in full swing. Abdul's entourage, all wearing traditional kimonos and burnouses, had brought along a modified camel that widdled champagne in copious quantities. He held up a huge platinum pitcher: "Drinks are on me!" he yodeled as Tolly Forsyth and some rum cove of a Grand Vizier—Toshiro Ibn Cut-Throat, I think—hoisted him atop their shoulders and danced a victory mazurka.

"Jolly good show, old son!" I called, ditching my helmet and gloves gratefully and pouring a beaker of bubbly over my steaming head. "Bot-toms up!"

"B'm's up undeed!" Abdul sprayed camel flux everywhere in salute. He was well into the spirit of things, I could tell; indeed, the spirit of things was well into *him*.

Ibn Cut-Throat's kid brother sidled up behind me. "If Ralphie-sama would care to accompany me to His Majesty's Brother's pleasure barge, we will be departing for Mars as soon as the rest of the guests arrive," he intimated.

"Rest of the guests? Capital, capital!" I glanced round in search of my clankie doxy, but there was no sign of Laura. Which was dashed strange, for she'd normally be all over me by this point in the proceedings: my nearly being turned off in front of an audience usually turned her on like a knife-switch. "Who else is coming?"

"Lots of people." Ibn Cut-Throat Junior looked furtive: "it's a very big party, as befits the prince's birthday. Did you know it was his birthday. . . ? It's a theme party, of course, in honor of the adoptive ancestors of his ancient line, the house of Saud."

Abdul al-Matsumoto is as much an authentic prince of Araby as I am a scion of the MacGregor, but that's the price we all pay for being descended from the *nouveau riche* who survived the Great Downsizing hundreds of years ago. Our ancestors bought the newly vacated titles of nobility, and consequently we descendants are forced to learn the bally traditions that go with them. I spent years enduring lessons in dwarf-tossing and caber-dancing, not to mention damaging my hearing learning to play the electric bagpipes, but Abdul has it worse: he's required by law to go around everywhere with a tea-towel on his head and to refrain from drinking fermented grape juice unless it's been cycled through the kidneys of a re-engineered dromedary. This aristocracy lark has its down side, you mark my words.

"A theme party," I mused, removing my face from my cup: "that sounds like fun. But I was planning on taking my gig. Is that okey-dokey, as they say? Is there room in the imperial marina?"

"Of course," said the vizier, leering slightly as a shapely femme wearing a belly-dancer's costume sashayed past. I noticed with distaste his hairless face and the pair of wizened testicles on a leather cord around his neck: some people think too much testosterone makes a cove stupid, but there's such a thing as going too far, what? "Just remember, it's a fancy-dress party. The theme is the thousand nights and one night, in honor of and for the selection of His Excellency's newest concuboid. His Excellency says you should feel free to bring a guest or two if you like. If you need an outfit—"

"I'm sure my household wardrobe will be able to see to my needs," I said, perhaps a trifle too sharply. "See you there!"

Ibn Cut-Throat bowed and scraped furiously as he backed away from me. *Something odd's going on here*, I realized, but before I could put my finger on it there was a whoosh and I saw the familiar sight of my gig—well, actually it's Uncle Featherstonehaugh's, but as he's not due back for six years I don't think that matters too much—descending to a perfect three-point landing.

I walked over to it slowly, lost in thought, only to meet Miss Feng marching down the ramp. "I didn't know you could fly," I said.

"My usual employer requires a full pilot's qualification, Sir. Military unrestricted license with interstellar wings and combat certification." She cleared her throat: "Among other skills." She took in my appearance, from scorched ablative boots to champagne hairstyle: "I've taken the liberty of laying out Sir's smoking jacket in the master stateroom. Can I suggest a quick shower might refresh the parts that Sir's friends' high spirits have already reached?"

"You may suggest anything you like, Miss Feng, I have complete confidence in your professional discretion. I should warn you I have a guest tagging along, but he won't be any trouble. If you show him to the lounge while I change, we shall be able to depart promptly. I don't suppose you've heard anything from Laura?"

She shook her head minutely. "Not so much as a peep, Sir." She stepped aside. "So, I'm to set course for Mars as soon as the guest is aboard? Very good, Sir. I shall be on the bridge if you need me."

It appeared that Miss Feng was not only an accomplished butler, but a dashed fine pilot as well. Would miracles never cease?

5. Miss Feng Serves the Wrong Beer

Uncle Featherstonehaugh's boat is furnished in white oak panels with brass trim, ochre crushed velvet curtains, and gently hissing gas lamps. A curving sofa extends around the circumference of the lounge, and for those tiresome long voyages to the outer system there are cozy state-rooms accessible through hidden sliding panels in the walls. It is a model of understated classical luxury in which a cove and his fellows can get discreetly bladdered while watching the glorious relativistic fireworks in the crystal screen that forms the ceiling. However, for the journey to Ab-

dul's pleasure dome on Mars it suffered from three major drawbacks. For one thing, in a fit of misplaced bonhomie I'd offered Edgestar Wolfblack a lift, and old Edgy wasn't the best company for a post-drop pre-prandial, on account of his preferred tipples being corrosive or hypergolic, or both. Secondly, Laura was still making her absence felt. And finally, as the icing on the cake, so to speak, Miss Feng had locked Jeremy in the luggage compartment. He was kicking up a racket as only a sober dwarf mammoth with a hangover can, and I could barely hear myself think over the din.

"Dash it all, how much beer did you give him?" I asked my butler.

"Two liters, Sir," Miss Feng replied. "Of the rather elderly Bragote from the back of your uncle's laboratory. I judged it the least likely to be missed."

"Oh dear God!" I cried.

"Bragh-ought?" echoed Edgy, as a plaintive squeal and a loud thud echoed from the under floor bay. By the sound of things Jeremy was trying to dash his brains out on the undercarriage. (Unfortunately a dwarf mammoth's skull is thick enough to repel meteors and small anti-matter weapons.)

"Was that a mistake?" Miss Feng enquired, unexpectedly tentatively.

I sighed. "You're new to the household, so I suppose you weren't to know this, but anything Uncle Featherstonehaugh brewed is best treated as an experiment in creative chemical warfare. He was particular keen on the Bragote: it's a mediaeval recipe and it requires a few years to mature to the consistency of fine treacle, but once you dilute the alcohol it's an excellent purgative. Or so I'm told," I added hastily, not wanting to confess to any teenage indiscretions.

"Oh dear." Her brow wrinkled. "One suspected it was a little past its prime. There is another firkin in the hold, just in case it becomes necessary to sedate Jeremy again."

"I don't think that will work," I said regretfully. "He's not *entirely* stupid. Uncle was working on a thesis that the Black Death of 1349 wasn't actually a plague but a hangover."

"Blackdeath? Is no posthuman of that nomenclature in my clade," Edgy complained.

BUMP went the floor beneath my feet, causing my teeth to vibrate. "Only two hours to Mars," Miss Feng observed. "If Sir will excuse me, I have to see to his costume before arrival." She retreated into one of the staterooms, leaving me alone with old Edgy and the pachydermal punctuation.

6. Pleasure Domes of Mars: A Primer

I arrived on Mars somewhat rattled, but physically none the worse for wear. Miss Feng had rustled up a burnoose, djellaba, and antique polyester two-piece for me from somewhere, so that I looked most dashing, ab-

solutely in character as a highly authentic Leisure Suit Larry of Arabia. I tried to inveigle her into costume, but she demurred: "I am your butler, Sir, not a party-goer in my own capacity. It wouldn't be right," she said, tucking an emergency vial of after-shave in my breast pocket. It's hard to argue with such certainty, although I have a feeling that she only said it because she didn't approve of the filmy harem pants and silver chainmail brassiere I'd brought along in hopes of being able to tempt Laura into them. Edgestar we dressed in a rug and trained to spit on demand: he could be my camel, just as long as nobody expected him to pass champagne through his reactor's secondary coolant circuit. Jeremy emerged from storage pallid and shaking, so Miss Feng and I improvised a leash and decided to introduce him as the White Elephant. Not that a real White Elephant would have menaced the world with such a malign, red-rimmed glare—or have smelled so unpleasantly fusty—but you can't have everything.

A word about Abdul's digs. Abdul al-Matsumoto, younger brother of the Emir of Mars, lives in a madly gothic palace on the upper slopes of Elysium Mons, thirteen kilometers above the dusty plain. Elysium Mons is so big you'd hardly know you were on a mountain, so at some time in the preceding five centuries one of Abdul's more annoying ancestors vandalized the volcano by carving out an areophysical folly, a half-scale model of Mount Everest protruding from the rim of the caldera. Thus, despite the terraforming that has turned the crumbly old war god into a bit of a retirement farm these days, Abdul's pleasure dome really is a dome, of the old-fashioned *do not break glass, do not let air out (unless you want to die)* variety.

Ground Control talked Miss Feng down into the marina below the sparkly glass facets of the dome, then sent a crawler tunnel to lock on to the door before old Edgy could leap out onto the surface and test his vacuum seals.

The door opened with a clunk. "Let's go, what?" I asked Jeremy. Jeremy sat down, swiveled one jaundiced eye toward me, and emitted a plaintive honk. "Be like that, then," I muttered, bending to pick him up. Dwarf mammoths are heavy, even in Martian gravity, but I managed to tuck him under my arm and, thus encumbered, led the way down the tube toward Abdul's reception.

If you are ever invited to a party by a supreme planetary overlord's spoiled playboy of a younger brother, you can expect to get tiresomely lost unless you remember to download a map of the premises into your monocle first. Abdul's humble abode boasts 2428 rooms, of which 796 are bedrooms, 915 are bathrooms, 62 are offices, and 147 are dungeons. (There is even a choice of four different Planetary Overlord Command Bunkers, each with their own color-coordinated suite of Doomsday Weapon Control Consoles, for those occasions on which one is required to entertain multiple planetary overlords simultaneously.)

If the palace was maintained the old-fashioned way—by squishy servants—it would be completely unmanageable: but it was designed in the immediate aftermath of the Martian hyper-scabies outbreak of 2407 that finished off those bits of the Solar System that hadn't already been clob-

bered by the Great Downsizing. Consequently it's full of shiny clicky things that scuttle about when you're not watching and get underfoot as they polish the marble flags and repair the amazingly intricate lapis lazuli mosaics and re-fill the oil lamps with extra-virgin olive oil. It still needs a sizable human staff to run it, but not the army you'd expect for a pile several sizes larger than the Vatican Hilton.

I bounced out of the boarding tube into the entrance hall and right into the outstretched arms of Abdul, flanked by two stern, silent types with swords, and a supporting cast of houris, hashishin, and hangers-on. "Ralphie-san!" he cried, kissing me on both cheeks and turning to show me off to the crowd: "I want you all to meet my honored guest, Ralph MacDonald Suzuki of MacDonald, Fifth Earl of That Clan, a genuine Japanese Highland Laird from old Scotland! Ralphie is a fellow skydiver and all-around good egg. Ralph, this is—harrumph!—Vladimir Illich of Ulianov, Chief Commissar of the Soviet Union." Ulianov grinned: under the false pate I could see it was our old drinking chum Boris the Tsarevitch. "And this—why, Edgy! I didn't recognize you in that! Is it a llama? How very realistic!"

"No, is meant to be a monkey," explained Wolfblack, twirling so that his false camel-skin disguise flapped about. I opened my mouth to tell him that the barrel Miss Feng had strapped to his back to provide support for the hump had slipped, but he turned to Abdul: "You like?"

"Jolly good, that outfit!"

"Pip pip," said Toadsworth, whirring alongside with a glass of the old neurotoxins gripped in one telescoping manipulator. I think it might have been a high-bandwidth infoburst rather than a toast, but due to my unfortunate hereditary allergy to implants I'm very bad at spotting that kind of thing. "Which way to the bar, old fellow?"

"That way," suggested Ibn Cut-Throat, springing from a hidden trapdoor behind a Ming vase. He pointed through an archway at one side of the hall. "Be seeing you!" His eyeballs gleamed with villainous promise.

A black-robed figure in a full veil was staring at me from behind two implausibly weaponized clankie hashishin at the back of the party. I got an odd feeling about them, but before I could say anything Toadsworth snagged my free hand in his gripper and began to tug me toward the old tipple-station. "Come-on! Inebriate!" He buzzed: "all enemies of sobriety must be inebriated! Pip pip!" Jeremy let out a squealing trumpet blast close to my ear and began to kick. Not having a third hand with which to steady him, I let go and he shot off ahead of us, stubby ears flapping madly in the low Martian gravity.

"Oh dear," said Miss Feng.

"Why don't you just run along and see to my chambers?" I asked, irritated by the thought that the bloody elephant might poop in the punch-bowl (or worse, dip his whistle in it) before I got there. "Leave the beast to me, I'll sort him out later."

"Inebriate! Inebriate!" cried Toadsworth, hurtling forward, the lights on his cortical turret flashing frantically. "To the party!"

* * *

7. In Which Ralph Explains the Nature of his Relationship with Laura

Now dash it all, it behooves a young fellow to remain discreet and close-lipped about matters of an embarrassingly personal nature. But it's also true to say that this story won't make a lot of sense without certain intimate understandings—a nod's as good as a wink to a deaf robot and all that—and in any event, ever since the minutiae of my personal affairs became part of the public gossip circuit following the unfortunate affair involving the clankie dominatrix, the cat burglar, and the alien hive-mind, it would be somewhat hypocritical of me to stand upon my privacy. So where a more modest cove might hesitate, allow me to step in it and, at risk of offending your sensibilities, explain something about my complex relationship with Laura.

I sometimes fancy that life must have been so much simpler back in the days of classical Anglo-American civilization, when there were only two openly acknowledged genders and people didn't worry about whether their intimate affairs were commutative, transitive, or reflexive. No clankie/squishie, no U or Non-U, nothing but the antique butch/femme juxtaposition, and that was pretty much determined by the shape of the external genitalia you were born with. Perverts dashed well knew what they were, and life was simple. Modern life is enough to drive a cove to drugs in my opinion, but as a Butch U Squishie of impeccable ancestry I have the social option of maintaining a mistress, not to mention the money, and that's where Laura comes in.

Laura is very clankie and very frilly femme with it, but with a squishy core and sufficiently non-U to make a casual relationship just barely acceptable to polite society on the usual sub-rosa Morganatic basis. We met on a shooting weekend at one of the Pahlavi girl's ranches on Luna, doing our bit for evolution by helping thin the herd of rampaging feral bots during their annual migration across the Sea of Tranquillity. I'm not sure what she was doing there, but I think it was something to do with working her way around the Solar System on a cut-price non-U grand tour: laboring as a courtesy masseuse in Japan and a topiarist on Ceres while saving up the price of her next interplanetary jaunt. Her maternity factory or mother or whoever was sending her a small allowance to help pay her way, I think, but she was having to work as well to make ends meet, a frightfully non-U thing for a cute little clankie princess to have to do. Our eyes met over the open breach of her silver-chased Purdey over-and-under EMP cannon, and as soon as I saw her delicately wired eyelashes and the refractive sheen on her breasts, simultaneously naked and deliciously inaccessible in the vacuum, I knew I had to have her. "Why, I do declare I'm out of capacitors!" she fluttered at me, and I bent over backward to offer her my heart, and the keys to the guest room.

There is something more than a little bit perverse about a squish who chases clankie skirt: even, one might suppose, something of the invert about them; but I can cope with sly looks in public, and our butch/femme U/non-U tuple is sufficiently orthodox to merely Outrage the Aunts,

rather than crossing the line and causing Offence. If she showed more squish while being less non-U, I suppose it would be too risqué to carry on in public—but I digress. I trust you can sympathize with my confusion? What else is a healthy boy to do when his lusts turn in a not-quite-respectable direction?

Of course, I was younger and rather more foolish when I first clapped eyes on the dame, and we've had our ups and downs since then. She was, to be fair, unaware of my unfortunate neurohormonal problems: and I wasn't entirely clear on the costs, both mechanical and emotional, of maintaining a clankie doxie in the style to which she would want to become accustomed. Nor did I expect her to be so enthusiastic a proponent of personality patches, or so prone to histrionic fits and thermionic out-rages. I expect I had some surprises for her, too. But we mostly seemed to bump along all right—until that last pre-drop walk-out, and her failure to turn up at the drop zone.

8. Jeremy Runs Amok; A Dreadful Discovery before Dinner

Among the various manners of recovering from the neurasthenic tension that accompanies a drop, I must admit that the one old Abdul had laid on for us took first prize for decadent (that means good) taste. It's hard to remain stressed out while reclining on a bed of silks in a pleasure palace on Mars, with nubile young squishies to drop pre-fermented grapes through your open lips, your very own mouth-boy to keep the hookah smoldering, and a clankie band plangently plucking its various organs in the far corner of the room.

Dancers whirled and wiggled and undulated across the stage at the front of the hall, while a rather fetching young squishie lad in a gold lamé loincloth and peacock feather turban waited at my left shoulder to keep my cocktail glass from underflowing. Candied fruits and jellied European cryoplankton of a most delightful consistency were of course provided. "What-ho, this is the life, isn't it?" I observed in the general direction of Toadsworth. My bot buddy was parked adjacent to my bower, his knobby mobility unit sucking luxuriously conditioned juice from a discreet outlet while the still squishy bits of his internal anatomy slurped a remarkably subtle smoked Korean soy ale from a Klein stein by way of a curly straw.

"Beep beep," he responded. Then, expansively and slowly, "you seem a little melancholy about something, old chap. In fact, if you had hyper-spectral imagers like me, you might notice you were a little drawn. Like this: pip." He said it so emphatically that even my buggy-but-priceless family heirloom amanuensis recognized it for an infoburst and misfiled it somewhere. "Indiscretions aside, if there's anything a cove can do to help you—enemies you want inebriated, planets you want conquered—feel free to ask the Toadster, what?"

"You're a jolly fine fellow and I may just do that," I said. "But I'm afraid it's probably nothing you can help with. I'm in a bit of a blue funk—did you know Laura left me? She's done it before several times, of course, but

she always comes back after the drop. Not this time, though, I haven't seen gear nor sprocket of her since the day before yesterday and I'm getting a bit worried."

"I shall make inquiries right away, old chap. The clankie grapevine knows everything. If I may make so bold, she probably just felt the need to get away for a while and lube her flaps: she'll be back soon enough." Toadsworth swiveled his ocular turret, monospectral emitters flashing brightly. "Bottoms up!"

I made no comment on the evident fact that if the Toadster ever did get himself arse over gripper he'd be in big trouble righting himself, but merely raised my glass in salute. Then I frowned. It was empty! "Boy? Where's my drink?" I glanced round. A furry brown sausage with two prominently flared nostrils was questing about the edge of the bower where my cocktail boy had been sitting a moment before.

"Grab him!" I swore at the lad, but I fear it wasn't his fault: Jeremy had already done him a mischief, and he was doubled over in a ball under the nearest curtain, meeping pathetically. Jeremy sucked the remains of my Saturnian ring ice-water margaritas up his nose with a ghastly slurping noise, and winked at me: then he sneezed explosively. An acrid eruption slapped my face. "Vile creature!" I raged, "What do you think you're doing?"

I'm told that I am usually quite good with small children and other animals, but I have a blind spot when it comes to Jeremy. He narrowed his eyes, splayed his ears wide, and emitted a triumphant—not to say alcohol-saturated—trumpet-blast at me. *Got you*, he seemed to be saying. *Why should you two-legs have all the fun?* I made a grab for his ears but he was too fast for me, nipping right under my seat and out the other side, spiking my unmentionables on the way as I flailed around in search of something to throw at him.

"Right! That does it!" People to either side were turning to stare at me, wondering what was going on. "I'm going to get you—" I managed to lever myself upright just in time to see Jeremy scramble out through one of the pointy-looking archways at the back of the hall, then found myself eyeball to hairy eyeball with Ibn Cut-Throat's administrative assistant.

"Please not to create so much of a noise, Ralphie-san," said the junior under-vizier: "His Excellency has an announcement to make."

And it was true. Human flunkies were discreetly passing among the audience, attracting the guests' attention and quieting down the background of chit-chat. The band had settled down and was gently serenading us with its plucked vocal chords. I glanced after Jeremy one last time: "I'll deal with *you* later," I muttered. Even by Jeremy's usual standards, this behavior was quite intolerable; if I didn't know better, I'd swear there was something up with the blighter. Then I looked back at the stage at the front of the room.

The curtain sublimed in a showy flash of velvet smoke, revealing a high throne cradled in a bower of hydroponically rooted date palms. His Excellency Abdul al-Matsumoto, younger sibling of the Emir of Mars, rose from his seat upon the throne: naked eunuch bodyguards, their skins oiled and gleaming, raised their katanas in salute to either side. "My friends," old

Abdul droned in a remarkably un-Abdul like monotone: "It makes me more happy than I can tell you to welcome you all to my humble retreat tonight."

Abdul wore robes of blinding white cotton, and a broad gold chain—first prize for atmosphere diving from the club, I do believe. Behind him, a row of veiled figures in shapeless black robes nudged each other. *His wives?* I wondered, *or his husbands?* "Tonight is the first of my thousand nights and one night," he continued, looking more than slightly glassy-eyed. "In honor of my sort-of ancestor, the Sultan Schahriar, and in view of my now being, quote, too old to play the field, my elder brother, peace be unto him, has decreed a competition for my hand in marriage. For this night and the next thousand, lucky concubines of every appropriate gender combination will vie for the opportunity to become my sole and most important sultana."

"That's right, it's not just a date!" added Ibn Cut-Throat, from the sidelines.

"I shall take the winner's hand in marriage, along with the rest of their body. The losers—well, that's too boring and tiresome to go into here, but they won't be writing any kiss-and-tell stories: they should have made backups before entering the competition, that's not my problem. Meanwhile, I ask you to raise a toast with me to the first seven aspiring princesses of Mars, standing here behind me, and their intelligence and courage in taking up Scheherazade's wager." He sounded bored out of his skull, as if his mind was very definitely busy elsewhere.

Everyone raised a toast to the competitors, but I was losing my appetite even before Ibn Cut-Throat stepped to the front of the stage to explain the terms of the competition, which would begin after the banquet. I may come from a long line of Japanese pretenders to the throne of a sheep-stealing bandit, but we'd never consider anything remotely as blood-thirsty and mediaeval as this. The prospect of spending a night with dashing young Abdul gave a whole new and unwelcome meaning to losing your head for love, as I suppose befitted a pretender to the crown of Ibn Saud—never mind the Sassanid empire—by way of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. "I don't think this is very funny," I mumbled to Toadsworth. "I wish Laura were here."

Toadsworth nudged me with his inebriator. "I don't think you need to worry about that, old chap. I spy with my little hyperspectral telescopic imager—"

—Ibn Cut-Throat was coming to the climax of his spiel: "gaze upon the faces of the brave beauties!" He crowed. "Ladies, drop your veils!"

I gaped like a fool as the row of black-garbed femmes behind the prince threw back their veils and bared their faces to the audience. For there, in the middle of the row, was a familiar set of silver eyelashes!

"Isn't that your mistress, old boy?" Toadsworth nudged me with his inebriator attachment. "Jolly rum do, her showing up here, what?"

"But she can't be!" I protested. "Laura can't be that stupid! And I always forget to remind her to take her backups, and she never remembers, so—"

"M'fraid it's still her on the stage, old boy," commiserated the Toadster.

"There's no getting around it. Do you suppose she answered an advertisement or went through a talent agency?"

"She must have been on the rebound! This is all my fault," I lamented.

"I disagree, old fellow, she's not squishy enough to bounce. Her head, anyway."

I glanced up at the stage, despondent. The worst part of it was, this was all my fault. If I'd actually bothered to pull myself out of my pre-drop funk and talked to her, she wouldn't be standing on stage, glancing nervously at the court executioners standing to either side. Then I saw her turn her head. She was looking at me! She mouthed something, and it didn't take a genius of lip-reading to realize that she was saying *get me out of here*.

"I'll rescue you, Laura," I promised, collapsing in a heap of cushions. Then my mouth-boy stuck a hookah in the old cake-hole and the situation lost its urgent edge. Laura wasn't number one on the old chop-chop list, it appeared. There'd be time to help her out of this fix after dinner.

9. An After-Dinner Show; Discussions of Horticulture

Dinner took approximately four hours to serve, and consisted of tiresomely symbolic courses prepared by master chefs from the various dominions of the al-Matsumoto empire—all sixty of them. The resulting cultural mélange was certainly unique, and the traditional veal tongue sashimi on a bed of pickled jellyfish cous-cous a l'Olympia lent a certain urgency to my inter-course staggers to the vomitorium. But I digress: I barely tasted a single bite, so deeply concerned was I for the whereabouts of my cyberdoxy.

After the last platter of chili-roast bandersnatch in honey sauce was cleared and the dessert wine piped to our tables, the game show began. And what a game show! I sat there shuddering through each round, hoping against hope that Laura wouldn't be called this time. Ibn Cut-Throat was master of ceremonies, with two dusky-skinned eunuchs to keep track of the score cards. "Contestant Number One, Bimzi bin Jalebi, your next question is: what is his Excellency the Prince's principal hobby?"

Bimzi rested one elaborately be-ringed fingertip on her lower lip and frowned fetchingly at the audience. "Surfing?"

"A-ha ha ha!" crowed Ibn Cut-Throat. "Not quite wrong, but I think you'd all agree she had a close shave there." The audience howled, not necessarily with joy: "so we'll try again. Bimzi bin Jalebi, what do you think his Excellency the Prince will see in you?"

Bimzi rested one elegant hand on a smoothly curved hip and jiggled seductively at the audience: "my unmatched belly-dancing skills and—" wink—"pelvic floor musculature?"

"I'm asking the questions around here!" mugged the vizier, leering at the audience. Everybody ooh'd. "Did you hear a question?" Everybody ooh'd even louder.

"Pip pip," said Toadsworth, quietly. He continued: "I detect speech stress analyzers concealed in the pillars, old boy. And something else."

"Let me remind you," oozed the Vizier, "that you are attending the court of his Excellency the Prince, and that any untruth told before me, in my capacity as grand high judicar before his court, may be revealed and treated as perjury. And—" he paused while a ripple of conversation sped around the room—"now we come to the third and final cut-off question before you spend a night of delight and jeopardy with his Royal Highness. What do you, Bimzi bin Jalebi, see in my Prince? Truthfully now, we have lie detectors and we know how to use them!"

"Um." Bimzi bin Jalebi smiled, coyly and winningly, at the audience, then decided that honesty combined with speed was the best policy: "a-mountain-of-gold-but-that's-not-my-only—"

"Enough!" Cut-Throat Senior clapped his hands together and her aborting speech was arrested by the snicker-snack of eunuch katanas and a bright squirt of arterial blood. "To cut a long story short, his Excellency can't stand wafflers. Or gold-diggers, for that matter." He glanced at one particular section of the audience who, standing under guard, were white with shock, and smiled toothily: "And so, now that we're all running neck and neck, who'd like to go first?"

"I can't bear this," I groaned quietly.

"Don't worry, old fellow, it'll be all right on the night," Toadster nudged me.

To prove him wrong, Ibn Cut-Throat hunted through the herd of candidates and—by the same nightmare logic that causes toast to always land buttered-side down except when you're watching it with a notepad and counter—who should his gaze fall on but Laura.

"You! Yes, *you*! It could be you!" cried the ghastly little fellow: "Step right up, my dear! And what's your name? Laura bin, ah, Binary? Ah, such a fragrant blossom, so redolent of machine oil and ceramics! I'd spin her cams any day of the week if I still had my undercarriage," he confided to the crowd as my pale person of pulchritude clutched a filmy veil around her and flinched. "First question! Are you the front end of an ass?"

Laura shook her head. The crowd fell silent. I tensed, balling my hands into fists. *If only there was something I could do!*

"Second question! Are you the back end of an ass?"

Laura shook her head again, silently. I tried to catch her eye, but she didn't look my way. I quailed, terrified. Laura is at her most dangerous when she goes quiet.

"Well then! Let me see. If you're not the front end of an ass, and you're not the back end of an ass, doesn't that mean you're no end of an ass?"

Laura gave him the old fish-eye for an infinitely long ten seconds then drawled, in her best Venusian butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth accent: "Why, I do declare, what is this 'ass' you speak of, human, and why are you so eager for a piece of it when you don't have any balls?"

I was on my feet, staggering uncertainly toward the stage, as Ibn Cut-Throat raised his fists above his head: "We have a winner!" he declared, and the crowd went wild. "You, my fragrant rose, have passed the first test and go forward to the second round! My gentles, let it be known that Laura Binary has earned the right to an unforgettable night of ecstasy in

the company of his Excellency the Prince!" *Sotto voce* to the audience: "Such a shame she won't live long enough to forget it afterward."

I saw red, of course: dash it, what else is a cove to do but stand up for his lady's honor? But before I could take a step forward, meaty hands descended on each of my shoulders. "Bed time," rumbled the guard holding my left arm. I glanced at his mate, who favored me with a suggestive leer as he fingered the edge of his blade.

"Flower bed time," he echoed.

"Ahem." I glanced at the stage, where Laura was struggling vainly as a cadre of guards as grotesquely overaugmented as old Edgy wrapped her in delicate silver manacles: "If you don't mind, old fellow, I've got a jolly good mind to tell your master he can take your daisies and push them—"

"Bed time," Miss Feng hissed urgently behind my right ear. "We need to talk," she added.

"Okay, bed time," I agreed, nodding like a fool.

Guard number two sighed dispiritedly as he sheathed his sword. "Petunias."

"What?"

"Not daisies. Petunias."

"Bed time!" Guard number one said brightly. I think he had a one-track mind.

"We were supposed to bury you under the petunias if you resisted," Guard number two explained. "It's so hard on the poor things, they don't get enough sunlight out here and the soil is too acidic—"

"No, no, see, he's quite right, if we bury him he's supposed to be pushing up daisies," said Guard number one, finally getting hold of the conversation. "So! Are you going to bed or are we going to have to tuck you—"

"I'm going, I'm going," I said. The homicidal horticulturalists let go of me with visible reluctance. "I'm gone," I whimpered.

"Not yet, Sir," said Miss Feng, politely but forcefully propelling me away from the ring of clanking guards surrounding the stage. "Let's talk about it in private, shall we?"

10. Miss Feng makes a series of Observations

The guards escorted me out of the dining pavilion and up two flights of stairs, then along a passageway to a palatial guest suite which had been made available for the members of the Club. Miss Feng followed, outwardly imperturbable, although I heard her swear very quietly when the guards locked and barred the main door.

"Dash it all." I stumbled and sat down on a pile of cushions. "I've got to rescue her before it's too late!"

Miss Feng looked at me oddly. "Indubitably, Sir. Although we appear to be locked in a guest suite on the second floor of a heavily fortified palace built by a paranoid lunatic, with guards standing outside the door to prevent any unscheduled excursions. Perhaps Sir would consider an after dinner digestif and a post-prandial nap instead?"

But I was too far gone in my funk to notice: "This is my fault! If only I'd talked to her instead, she wouldn't be here. This isn't like Abdul, either. I know him, he's a good egg. There must be some mistake!"

"If Sir will listen to me for a minute—" Miss Feng drew a deep and exasperated breath, her chest swelling beneath her traditional black jacket in a most fetching manner—"I believe the key to the problem is not rescuing Miss Laura, but *making a successful escape* afterward. Sir will perhaps recall the planetary defense grasers and orbital arbalests dug into the walls of the caldera? While I am an adequate pilot, I would much prefer our departure from the second-most-heavily fortified noble house on Mars to be facilitated by traffic rather than fire control. And—" she raised one eyebrow, infinitesimally—"Sir *did* promise his sister to take care of her mammoth."

"Dash it all to hell and back!" I bounced to my feet unsteadily: "Who cares about Jeremy?"

Miss Feng fixed me with a steely gaze: "You will, if your sister thinks you've mislaid him on purpose, Sir."

"Oh." I nodded, crestfallen, and ambled over to the screen of intricately carved soapstone fretwork that separated the central lounge from the inner servants' corridor. Small thingumabots buzzed and clicked outside, scurrying hither and yon about their menial tasks. "I suppose you're right. Well, then. We need to rescue Laura, retrieve Jeremy from whatever drunken escapade he's got himself into, *and* talk our way out of this. Bally nuisance, why can't life be simple?"

"I couldn't possibly comment, Sir. Compared to covering for one of Prince W the thirteenth's little escapades this should be a piece of cake. Incidentally, did you notice anything odd about the Sheikh Abdul tonight?"

"What? Apart from his rum desire to butcher my beloved—"

"I was thinking more along the lines of the spinal parasite crab someone has enterprisingly planted on him since the race, Sir."

"The spinal what? Dear me, are you telling me he's caught something nasty? Do I need to take precautions?"

"Only if Sir wishes to avoid having his brain hijacked by a genetically engineered neural parasite, his prefrontal lobes scooped out and eaten, and his body turned into a helpless meat puppet. Mr al-Matsumoto's burnoose covered it incompletely, and I saw it when he turned round: you might have noticed he's not quite himself right now. I believe it is being controlled by Toshiro ibn-Rashid, the vizier."

"Oops." I paused a moment in silent sympathy. "Bloody poor show, that."

"I've seen more than one attempted coup d'état in my time, Sir, and it occurs to me that this is an unhealthy situation to be in. The banquet continues for three more days, and Sir might usefully question the wisdom of staying to the end. After all, his Excellency's puppet master didn't throw a party and invite all of the prince's personal friends along for no good reason, did he?"

"Then I suppose we'll just have to rescue Laura and make our escape." I stopped. "Um. But how?"

"I have a plan, Sir. If you'd start by taking this sober-up, then I'll explain. . . ."

11. A Meeting in the Tunnels

Miss Feng's Plan was certainly everything you could ask for. One might even suspect her of black ops training, but experience has taught me that it is best to never knowingly underestimate the lethality of a sufficiently determined butler. I confess I harbored certain misgivings about the nature of her proposed offensive—but with stakes this high I was prepared to work to any plan.

However, it was after midnight before we could start, when the guards opened the doors to direct a shambolically intoxicated Edgestar and a thoroughly inebriated Toadsworth into our company. "Pip Paaarrrrrp," Toadsworth burped, drifting to a bumpy halt in the middle of the floor: his cortical turret spun round twice with the force of the belch, as his lights strobed down through the spectrum and went dark.

"Am being pithed," said Edgestar, shambling into a pillar and collapsing onto two legs. "Huuuurk!"

"Let me help you with that," I said, stepping forward to relieve him of his camel-hair coat—and the full firkin of Bragote that Miss Feng had secreted beneath it. I nearly dropped the cask: nine gallons of ale is quite an armful, especially when it's bottled up in corrosion-proof steel and bio-hazard warning stickers.

"Aaah, that's better," mumbled Edgestar, another leg retracting with a hiss of hydraulics and a brief stink of chlorine. "M tired. G'night."

"Quietly," Miss Feng reminded me, as I lowered the deadly cylinder to the tiles. "Excellent. I'll take care of this." She rolled it on its side, directing it toward the door, as she palmed a pre-emptive sober-up. "I'm sure it will be quite the hit at the squishie servants' party," she added, with something very like a shudder.

I tip-toed away from the door as she knocked on it, then dived into my room to hide as the bolts rattled. As a servant, Miss Feng stood a better chance of avoiding suspicion than I—but she had other tasks in mind for which Edgestar, Toadsworth, and I were clearly well-suited. And so I swallowed my misgivings, picked up the sober-up spray, and approached Toadsworth.

"Excuse me old chap," I essayed, "but are you up for a jolly jape?"

"Bzzzt—" The cortical turret turned toward me and I confronted a red-rimmed eye stalk: "In-ebriate? Par-ty?"

"Jolly good show, Toadster. But I think you might enjoy this first, what?" I flicked the sober-up at him. "Don't want to let the side down, do we?"

There was a muffled explosion, his cortical turret spun round three times, and steam hissed from under his gasket. "You unspeakable bounder!" He buzzed at me. "That was below the belt!" His lights flashed ominously. "I've a good mind to—"

"Whoa!" I held up a hand. "I'm terribly sorry, and I'll happily demonstrate the depth of my gratitude by groveling in any way you can imagine afterward, but we need to rescue Laura from the harem, and then we need to make our escape from the evil vizier and his mind control minions."

"Really?" The Toadster froze in place for a moment. "Did you say *evil vizier*? With minions? My favorite kind!"

"Top hat, old boy, top hat!" I waved my hands encouragingly. "All we need to do is get old Edgy awake—"

"Some'buddy mention nominative identifier?" With a whine of overstrained hydraulics Edgestar Wolfblack began to unfold from his heap on the floor. One foot skidded out from under him and ended up scuttling around the skirting board, barking furiously until the Toadster was forced to shoot it to death with his Inebriator. "Hurrrrrk. Query vertical axis of orientation?"

"That way," I said, pointing at the ceiling. Edgy groaned, and began to quiver and fold in on himself, legs and arms retracting and strange panels extending to reveal a neat set of chromed wheels.

"Vroom," he said uncertainly. "Where to?"

"To the harem! To rescue Laura and the other contestants, while Miss Feng poisons the squishie servants with Uncle Featherstonehaugh's Bragote," I explained. "If you'd be so good as to follow me, chaps. . . ."

I pulled on the black abaya Miss Feng had procured for me, then bent down to tap on the robot servitor's hatch, clutching the identity beacon Miss Feng had acquired from one of the waitrons during dinner. The hatch deigned to recognize the beacon and opened, for which I was duly grateful.

The servants' tunnel was built to a more than human scale: not all the bots were small bleepy things. I screwed my monocle firmly into place and hurried along the dank, roughly finished tunnel, blessing my foresight in remembering to download the map. I don't mind admitting that I was sweating with fright, but at least I was in good company, with Edgestar whizzing alongside like a demented skateboard and the Toadster gliding menacingly through the darkened tunnel, his trusty Inebriator raised and ready to squirt.

Miss Feng's plan was clear. The unlucky ladies would almost certainly be languishing under lock and key in the harem. Moreover, the harem's main entrance would be guarded by palace eunuchs, or possibly chaperone-bots. However, she speculated, the servants' passage would still be open—if we could get past the inevitable guard on the back passage. We would find the chaperone-bot, I would pretend to be a fainting misplaced maiden, and Edgy and the Toadster would play the part of Palace security guards who had found me and were taking me back inside. Getting out would be a little harder, but by then Uncle Featherstonehaugh's tipple should have taken effect. . . .

Something moved in the tunnel ahead of me and I froze, knock-kneed in fear. I don't lack moral fiber, it just gives me the runs: I swore under my breath and stopped dead in my tracks as Toadsworth ran over my hem. "What is it?" He buzzed, quietly.

"I don't know. Shh."

Holding my breath, I listened. There was a faint shuffling noise, a breathy whistling, and then a clicking noise from the dark recesses of a twisty little side-passage. A shadow moved across the floor, and paused. I sniffed, smelling an unholy foulness of stale sweat and something else,

something familiar—I then blinked, as two evil, red-rimmed orbs brimming with pure, mindless hate loomed out of the darkness toward me.

“Jeremy!” The delinquent dwarf reared back, waving his tusks drunkenly in my face, and I could see his trunk begin to flare, ready to blow a betraying blast on the old blower. There was only one thing for it—I reached out and grabbed. “Hush, you silly old thing! If they hear you, they’ll kill you, too!”

Grabbing a mammoth by the trunk—even a hung-over miniature mammoth who’s three sheets to the wind and tiddly to the point of winking—is not an act I can recommend to the dedicated follower of the quiet life. However, rather than responding with his usual murderous rage at the universe for having made him sixteen sizes too small, Jeremy blinked at me tipsily and sat down. For a moment I dared to hope that the incident would pass without upset—but then the gathering *toute* came out *suite*, and the foul little beast sneezed a truly elephantine blast of beer-smelling spray in my direction. I let go instinctively: he struggled back to his feet and began to reverse symbolically into the tunnel, with a mistrustful glare directed over my left shoulder. I tried to scuttle after him, only to be brought up short by the Toadster, who was still parked on my skirt. “Dash it all, men, follow that mammoth!”

With a brain-rattling crash, a fiendishly stealthed black chaperone-bot jumped over my suddenly stationary form, slipped on the snot-lubed floor, tumbled head-over-heels into the far wall, and crashed to the ground in a shower of spiked armor and vicious stabby bits. I nearly jumped right out of my skin—indeed, I believe separating me from my integument had been the sole purpose of its acrobatic display.

Before I could gather my disguise and my wits and run, Edgestar revved up to speed and whizzed past me. Vrooming like a very vroomy thing, he jumped on the bally bot in a most unfriendly manner! It was a sight to see, I can assure you. The chaperone-bots of al-Matsumoto look a lot like Edgestar in humanoid form, only less convivial and disinclined to a discreet afternoon tippie when they could be out and about, briskly ripping unfortunates limb from limb. But being bots, they lack the true *élan* and *esprit* of a clankie, and even a hung-over tea-trolley posthumanoid is a fearsome thing to behold when it gets its cricket box on. Jeremy scampered off into the bowels of the palace honking tunelessly; meanwhile, old Edgy bounced up and down on the combat robot’s abdomen, squeaking furiously and spinning his wheels. They had cute little cutting disks on their inner rims! The chaperone-bot lay on its back, stiletto-tipped legs curling over and inward to stab repeatedly at the assailant on its abdomen, but Edgy was too fast for it. Presently it stabbed too enthusiastically for its own good—and Edgestar yanked hard, pulling the stinger under the edge of a gaping inspection panel. With a triumphant squeal of brakes he leapt off the chaperone-bot just in time, transforming back into humanoid form in mid-air as sparks began to fly and an acrid smoke poured from its joints.

“Jolly good show, that transformer!” I exclaimed.

“Pip-pip!” said the Toadster, regaining some of his *joie de vivre*.

I consulted my map again. “The back door to the harem is just around

the corner! I say old chap, I think you've cleared the last obstacle. Let's shuftie, shall we? If we're to be home by tea it behooves us to get our move on."

12. I Find Laura in Questionable Company

Well, to cut a long story short, there I was in the harem of the Emir of Mars's younger brother, surrounded by adoring femmes, while my two fellows from the Club made themselves scarce. "Darling," Laura trilled, reclining in my arms, "I do confess, I am so *touched*! Hic."

"I know, my dear, but we can't stay here." I quickly outlined what I knew. "Miss Feng thinks the evil Vizier is conspiring to build resentment against the oppressive and harsh autocracy of the al-Matsumoto clan, and intends to use it to foment a revolt."

"But the al-Matsumotos aren't harsh and autocratic!" complained one of the ladies, a cute blonde bimbettebot in filmy harem pants and tank top: "they're cute!" The room descended into giggles, but I frowned, for this was no laughing matter.

"They'll be harsh and autocratic by the time Ibn Cut-Throat's spinal crab is through with Abdul! Dash it all, do you want to be decapitated? Because that's what's going to happen if the Vizier seizes power! He won't have any use for you—he's the chief eunuch! He's an ex-man, and his special power is chopping off heads! He probably thinks testosterone is something you catch from sitting too many exams."

"Oh, I'm sure I can fix *that*," a dusky six-armed beauty informed me with a flick of her aristocratic nose: "I didn't study regenerative medicine for nothing." Her arch look took in Laura: "Why don't you take yourself and your tin-plate tart and leave us to sort out the matter of succession? She was only going to go down hard in the talent show round, anyway."

"Pip-pip!" called Toadsworth, sailing from one vaulted side-chamber to another in pursuit of a giggling conical debutante, a silk favor knotted around his monocular. "Party back at my pad, old chap! Bring a knobby pal! Inseminate! Inseminate! Bzzt!" I looked away before the sight of his new plug-in could scar my retinas for life. You can't take these clankie stallions anywhere in polite company, they can't so much as wink at a well-lubed socket without wanting to interface with it—

"She's right, darling, we must be going." Laura laid her elegant head on my shoulder and sighed. "Oh I do declare; my feet are killing me." I scooped her up in my arms, trying to see over a faceful of frills.

"I've missed you so much," I told her. "But what are you doing here anyway?"

"Hush." She kissed me, and for a moment the world went away: "My brave, butch, bullish Ralphie!" She sighed again. "I was going to hold out until after the race! But I had just checked into the Hilton when I received a telephone call saying there was a gentleman waiting to see me in the lobby."

Jealousy stabbed at me. "Who was it?" I asked, cringing and glancing

away as Edgestar rolled past, having transformed himself into a tentacularly enhanced chaise lounge for the amusement of the blonde bimbot, who appeared to be riding him around the room using his unmentionables as a joystick.

"I don't remember," she said dreamily. "I woke up here, waiting for my prince—you! I do declare—but Toshiro said he was arranging a surprise for you, and there'd be a party, and then it all went a little vague—"

I can tell you, I was freezing inside as I began to realize just how disoriented she was. "Laura, what's gotten into you?"

"Not you, not lately!" she said sharply, then lapsed back into dreamy incoherence: "But you came to rescue me, Ralphie, oh! He said you would. I swoon for you! Be my love rocket again!"

I saw a small, silver receptacle on a nearby table, and my heart sank: she'd clearly been at the happy juice. Then I sneaked a peek at the sockets on the back of her neck, under her hairline, and gasped. Someone had planted a hedonism chip and a mandatory override on her! No wonder she was acting out of sorts.

I plucked the ghastly thing out and dropped it on the floor. "Laura, stand up!" I cajoled. "We've got to be leaving. There's a party to be going to, don't you know? Let's go."

"But my—" She wobbled, then toppled against me: "Whoops!" She giggled. "*Hic*." I might have pulled the chips out of the fryer but my fish was still thoroughly pickled.

I hadn't expected this, but Miss Feng had insisted I take a reset pill, just in case. I hated to use the thing on her—or rather, Laura hated it, and this invariably led to a fight afterward—but sobriety is a lesser evil than being trapped in a castle by a mad vizier while subjected to mood-altering implants, what? So I pressed the silver cap against the side of her neck and pushed the button.

Laura's jaws closed with an audible click, and she tensed in my arms for a second. "Ouch," she said, very quietly. "You bastard, you know I hate that. What's going on?"

"You're on Mars and we're in a bally fix, that's what's going on. This Ibn Cut-Throat fellow's a thoroughly bad egg. He's sneaked a spinal crab onto old Abdul, I think he picked you up because he wants a handle on me, and doubtless that's why the rest of the Club's all here—we'd be first to notice a change in our boy Abdul's behavior, wouldn't we? The cad's obviously set up the sticky wicket so he can bowl us all out in one inning."

"Dear me." Laura stood up straight and took a step away from me. "Well, then we'd better be going, darling." She straightened her attire and looked around, raising one sculpted eyebrow at my dishevelment. "Do you know how to get out of here?"

"Certainly." I took her hand in mine, and led her toward the central lounge. "I'm sure there must be a way out around here somewhere. . . ."

"Over there," offered bin-Sawbones, pointing: "you can't miss it, head for the two hulking eunuchs and the evil vizier." She pushed me hard in the small of my back. "Sorry, but business is business and when you're trying to marry the second richest man on Mars you can't be too picky, eh?"

13. Jeremy Pulls it off

The exit was unfortunately obstructed by Ibn Cut-Throat and his merry headsmen—with Abdul in tow, glassy-eyed and arms outstretched, muttering about brains. And Ibn Cut-Throat had spotted us!

One thing I *will* credit the blighter with: his sense of spectacle was absolutely classical. "Ah, Mister MacDonald!" he cried, menacingly twirling the anti-chemwar vibrissae glued to his upper lip. "How disappointing to see you here! I must confess I hoped you'd have sense enough to stay in your room and keep out of trouble. I suppose now you hope I'm going to tell you all my plans, then lock you in an inadequately secured cell so you can escape? I'm afraid not: I shall simply have you cut off shortly, chop-chop. My game's afoot, and none will stop it now, for the ineluctable dialectic of history is on my side!"

"I don't care what your dastardly scheme is, I have a bone to pick with you, my man!" I cried. The two headsmen took a step forward, and Laura clung to me in fear—whether feigned or otherwise I could not tell. "How dare you kidnap my concubine on the eve of a drop! That's not cricket, or even baseball, and it'll be a cold day in hell before I see you in any of my clubs, even by the tradesmen's entrance!" Meanwhile, Laura thrust a shapely arm inside my abaya and was fumbling with something in my dinner jacket pocket; but my attention was fixed on the villain before me.

"Clubs." The word dropped from his lips with stony disinterest. "As if the degenerate recreations of the class enemy would be of any interest to me!" I shuddered: it's always a bad sign when the hired help starts talking in polysyllables. One of his nostrils flared angrily. "Clubs and sports and jolly capers, that's all you parasites think of as you gobble down our surplus wealth like the monstrous leeches you are!" I'd struck a nerve, as I could see from the throbbing vein in his temple and the set of his jaw. "Bloated ticks languishing in the lap of luxury and complaining about your parties and fashions while millions slave for your banquets! Bah." Laura unwrapped her arm from my robe and covered her face, evidently to shield herself from the scoundrel's accusations. "When we strive to better ourselves you turn your faces away and sneer, and when we give up you use us as beasts of burden! Well, I've had enough. It's time to return your stolen loot to the toiling non-U proletarian masses."

My jaw dropped. "Dash it all, man, you can't be serious! Are you telling me you're a . . . ?"

"Yes," he grated, his eyes aflame with vindictive glee: "the crisis of capitalism is finally at hand, at long last! It's about seven centuries and a Great Downsizing overdue, but it's time to bring about the dictatorship of the non-U and the resurrection of the proletariat! And your friend Abdul al-Matsumoto is going to play a key role in bringing about the final raising of class consciousness by fertilizing the soil of Olympus with the blood of a thousand maidens, and then crown himself Big Brother and institute a reign of terror that will—"

Unfortunately I can't tell you how the Ibn-Cut Throat Committee for the Revolution intended to proceed, because we were simultaneously in-

errupted by two different people: namely, by Laura, who extended her shapely hand and spritzed him down with after-shave: and then by Jeremy.

Now, it helps to be aware that harems are not exactly noted for their testosterone-drenched atmosphere. I was, of course, the odd squishie out. Old Edgy was clearly hors de combat or combat des whores (if you'll strangle my French) and the Toadster was also otherwise engaged, exploring conic sections with the fembot he'd been chasing earlier. But aside from myself and Ibn Cut-Throat—and, I suppose, Abdul, if he was still at home upstairs what with that crab-thingie plastered to his noggin—they were the only remotely butch people present.

Jeremy had been in smelly, sullen retreat for the past week. Not to put too fine a point on it, he was in musth, that state in which a male mammoth or elephant hates and resents other males because the universe acquires a crystal clarity and his function in life is to . . . well, Edgestar and Toadsworth got there first, minus the trumpeting and displays of aggression, but I'm sure you understand? There were no other small male mammals present, but Jeremy was well aware of his enemy, and his desperate need to assert his alpha-male dominance before he could go in search of cows to cover—and more importantly, there was one particular scent he associated with the enemy from long mutual acquaintance. His enemy smelled like *me*. But *I* was shrouded in a blackly occlusive robe, while Ibn Cut-Throat had just been doused in my favorite splash. And whatever Jeremy's other faults, he's never been slow to jump to a conclusion.

I do not know what passed through the 80 percent of Jeremy's cranial capacity that serves as target acquisition and fire control, but he made his choice almost instantly and launched himself straight for where Ibn Cut-Throat's crown jewels had once resided. Proboscideans are not usually noted for their glide ratio, but, in the weaker than accustomed Martian gravity, Jeremy was positively aerobatic, as he jumped with grace and elegance and tusks, straight for Toshiro's tushie.

"Tally ho, old boy!" I shouted, giving him the old school best, as Laura took two steps smartly forward and, raising her skirts, daintily kick-boxed headsman number one in the forehead with one of her most pointed assets—for her ten centimeter stiletto heels are not only jolly fine pins, they're physical extensions of her chrome-plated ankles.

Now I confess that things looked dicey when headsman number two turned on me with his axe and bared his teeth at me. But I'm not the Suzuki of MacDonald for nothing, and I know a thing or two about fighting! I threw the abaya back over my head to free my arms, and pointed Toadsworth's Inebriator—which he had earlier entrusted to my safe-keeping in order to free up a socket for his Inseminator—at the villain. "Drop it! Or I'll drop you!" I snarled.

My threat didn't work. The thug advanced on me, and as he raised his blade I discovered to my horror that the Toadster must have some very double-jointed fingers in order to work that trigger. But just as the barber of Baghdad was about to trim my throat, a svelte black silhouette drew up behind him and poured a canister of vile brown ichor over his head! Screaming and burbling imprecations, he sank to the floor clawing at his eyes, just in time for Laura to finish him off with a flamenco stomp.

Miss Feng cleared her throat apologetically as she lowered the empty firkin to the floor. (The brightly painted tiles began to blur and run where its damp rim rested on them.) "Sir might be pleased to note that one has taken the liberty of moving his yacht round to the tradesmen's entrance and disabling the continental defense array in anticipation of Sir's departure. Was Sir planning to stay for the bombe surprise, or would he agree that this is one party that he would prefer to cut short?"

I glanced at Ibn Cut-Throat, who was still writhing in agony under Jeremy's merciless onslaught, and then at the two pithed headsmen. "I think it's a damned shame to outstay our welcome at any party, don't you agree?" (Laura nodded enthusiastically and knelt to tickle Jeremy's trunk.) "By all means, let's leave. If you'd be so good as to pour a bucket of cold water over Edgy and the Toadster, I'll take Abdul in hand and we can drop him off at a discreet clinic where they treat spinal crabs, what-what?"

"That's a capital idea, Sir. I shall see to it at once." Miss Feng set off to separate the miscreants from their amorous attachments.

I turned to Laura, who was still tickling Jeremy—who by now was lying on his back, panting—and raised an eyebrow. "Isn't he sweet?" she sang.

"If you say so. You're carrying him, though," I said, ungratefully. "Let's hie thee well and back to Castle Pookie. This has been altogether too much of the wrong kind of company for me, and I could do with a night-cap in civilized company."

"Darling!" She grabbed me enthusiastically by the trousers: "and we can watch a replay of your jump together!"

And indeed, to cut a long story short, that's exactly what we did—but first I took the precaution of locking Jeremy in the second best guest suite's dungeon with a bottle of port, and gave Miss Feng the night off.

After all, two's company but three's jolly confusing, what? ○

IN THE LIGHT ROOM

the photographer patiently renders
her obscured subjects –
singularities, dark matter,
conspiracies, impossible sciences –
into precise, radiant stillness.
– John Garrison



SCIENCE FICTION SUDOKU

This month's SF Sudoku puzzle, the subject of which was suggested by sudoku contest runner-up James Goreham, is solved using the letters AEJMNORST. Place a letter into each box so that each row across, each column down, and each small nine-box square within the larger diagram (there are nine of these) will contain each of these letters. No letter will appear more than once in any row, column, or smaller nine-box square. The solution is determined through logic and the process of elimination. Beneath the puzzle is a set of twelve blanks. Rearrange the following letters for an SF concept: A, A, E, J, M, N, N, O, R, S, S, and T. The answers for the Sudoku puzzle and the anagram can be found beneath our classified ads on page 143. The solution to each puzzle is independent of the other. We've inverted the answer to the anagram so that you don't come upon it by accident.

		R				M	S	J
	A		R		N			
M				S	J			A
			J	N		R	T	
R	J						N	O
	S	T		A	R			
E			N	O				R
			E		M		A	
A	O	J				E		

Beautiful Dreamer

It's been a banner period for new volumes concerning the life and career of artist Winsor McCay, he of *Little Nemo* fame. Checker Publishing <www.checkerbpg.com> continues their series of *Early Works*, which is now up to Volume Six. *Winsor McCay: His Life and Art*, by John Canemaker and Maurice Sendak, offers us insights into the man behind the drawings. And *Little Nemo in Slumberland—So Many Splendid Sundays*, by Winsor McCay and Peter Maresca, having debuted in a gloriously oversized edition of limited availability, is now out of print and selling for three times its original price online.

Today I'd like to look at another entry in the McCay revival: *Daydreams and Nightmares: The Fantastic Visions of Winsor McCay, 1898-1934* (Fantagraphics, trade paperback, \$24.95, 176 pages, ISBN 156097569-5). For lack of editorial attribution, I have to assume that the book was compiled by publisher Gary Groth, with input perhaps from the author of the book's intelligent preface, Richard Marschall.

Whoever selected and sorted these B&W images, they've chosen wisely and arranged intelligently. The lead-in material covers McCay's pioneering work in the animated cartoon medium, using McCay's own words in the form of a couple of essays. Then follow chapters respectively titled "Early Magazine Work," "Newspaper Fantasy Illustrations," "Mid-

summer Daydreams and Other Comic Strips," "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," "Sunday Excursions," and "Sermons on Paper." You'll note the absence of any *Little Nemo*, which strikes me as a judicious move, given the wide exposure of that icon.

The allure of these drawings for the typical *Asimov's* reader lies in their fantastical subject matter and treatment. With the exception of one or two mimetic editorial cartoons, every image herein depicts striking phenomena or actions or scenery that are either science fictional or surreal or absurd or oneiric. On p. 89, we find the mordant "Busy to the End," which presents a post-apocalyptic city street where a Robinson Crusoe survivor is still vainly trying to hoard cash on the steps of a shattered bank. On page 127, "You Will See This" features an airliner of the future big as the *Titanic*. "Here God has Placed Us" (p. 139) is an allegory of mankind's place in the cosmos.

These full-page canvases are rivaled only by the compact comic strips that McCay prodigiously produced. In all of them, his masterful architectural renderings, along with the machinery and furniture of everyday life, conspire with his fevered imagination to produce sights straight out of Dali. A jealous suitor flattens his rival like a piece of tin. A man's head swells and explodes in a burst of clockwork. A snow-eating dinosaur emerges from a suburban garage. The Sphinx of Egypt comes alive and capers after a tourist. An asparagus shoot pokes from the soil

and swiftly matures to Jack-in-the-Beanstalk proportions. And so on and so on, with nary a repeat.

One of McCay's great themes was the mutability of form, with objects transforming or altering their proportions. For instance, on p. 64, we witness a fur coat become a live bear, which promptly begins to savage its former wearer. This kind of protean identity shifting harks back to Greek myths—woman into tree, man into deer. Beneath their hilarious comedic surface—which itself is no trivial façade—McCay's art speaks to universal fantasies regarding the commonality of all existence.

But what's also neat about this work is its historicity. Like all geniuses, McCay was both timeless and of his time. His strips are full of archetypes of the early twentieth-century USA: plutocrats, immigrants, housewives, Penrod boys, Pollyanna girls, office drones, boulevardiers, showgirls, and foxy grampas. From the point of view of the twenty-first century, nostalgia for a "simpler" era wafts potently off the page.

Likewise, McCay partakes of the Rooseveltian/Edwardian utopianism familiar to SF readers from the Gernsback/Frank Paul axis. McCay's delight in the glories of progress (see "Men Will Live on Mountaintops," p. 129, for one instance) was matched only by his fears that stupidity would bring the whole edifice of civilization toppling down, resulting in the Thomas-Cole-style destruction he likewise exulted in as warning prophecy.

The final image in this wonderful book is a curious allegory. A man stands with his back to the viewer at the edge of a Grand Canyon vista. But at the bottom of the canyon is the skyscraper-clustered island of Manhattan, unmistakable in its por-

trayal. What is arguably the quintessential urban center of the modern world is dwarfed by the natural surroundings into which it has been transplanted. The city is somehow simultaneously both diminished and exalted by this transposition. And the lone human viewer on his godlike perch—could this be McCay himself, contemplating the source of his inspiration from a celestial vantage, and thereby gaining some new perspective on both its worth and its inconsequence?

Even now, in the early years of a new century, McCay still towers over all those appreciators and creators he continues to inspire.

And one of those heirs is certainly the artist Tony Millionaire. Millionaire's work—most of which is in arresting black and white, just like McCay's—shares a lot of features with the master's. Like McCay, Millionaire can produce stunning architectural or landscape vistas, populated by rubbery humans and monsters. He's concerned with the intersection of reality and fantasy. And his plots and characters often manifest a kind of deliberately naïve (yet seldom campy or twee) stream-of-consciousness surrealism.

Millionaire's latest graphic novel, *Billy Hazelnuts* (Fantagraphics, hardcover, \$19.95, 110 pages, ISBN 156097701-9) is a magnificent introduction to Millionaire's oeuvre (much of which centers around his ragbag hero, Sock Monkey), a perfect jumping-on point for readers of all ages. Here, Millionaire's drawing and storytelling combine to produce another rousing scary comedic adventure with less grimness than some of his work. (Will we ever forget Sock Monkey's suicide bid?)

The bad mice who live in the Rim-

perton household are determined to get back at the lady of the kitchen, who thwarts their raids. They fashion a kind of little golem out of organic debris and animate it. This is the eponymous Billy Hazelnuts, named for the nuts that serve as his eyes. Billy fails to achieve the goals of the mice, but is adopted by Becky Rimperton, the young savant modeled along the lines of Alan Moore's Jack B. Quick or Dexter from TV's *Dexter's Laboratory*.

Before you can say "jealous mad scientist suitor" (Becky's nerdy neighbor, Eugene, fills that role), Becky and Billy are abroad on myriad adventures, including a visit to the dump for smashed planets and a ferocious battle between Eugene's robotic pirate ship and Becky's transmogrified militant Noah's Ark. Becky and Billy will undergo separation and loss, but all comes round fine in the tender climax.

Millionaire's skill at eccentric dialogue (Billy exclaims, "I'm the pet child of calamity! I'll swallow a live goat with all his hair and horns on!") and his ridiculous propositions (a "seeing-eye skunk" that sends out olfactory radar) will leave any receptive reader rolling in the aisles. He conjures up a unique world that harks back to some magical L. Frank Baum era of culture, but which is informed by all the vicissitudes of the past hundred years.

In short, if Winsor McCay were alive today, he'd either be creating *Billy Hazelnuts* or praising it to the skies.

The Archenemy of Thinness, Clutter, and Cliché

When Samuel "Chip" Delany talks about writing, I listen with every atom of my being: precisely the same

way Delany proclaims his hard-won truths.

Delany has certainly spent more time thinking about the process of generating narratives—and subsequently getting the fruits of his lubrications down on paper—than any other writer in the genre. Other masters of the finely wrought sentence, the compulsively readable masterpiece—Disch, Crowley, Aldiss, Wolfe—have done some major critical work, but it all pales in comparison to Delany's sustained and extensive corpus. He is the one working fiction writer in our field who can boast a multi-volume assault (or is it a seduction?) on the brute mechanics and numinous quiddities of the tale-telling process.

Delany's latest volume in this vein might be his best yet. It covers everything from atomistic grammar tips to the founts of creative inspiration, with many a mid-level stop at the practical, the historical, the canonical—in short, the grand auctorial tragicomedy. The book's title hints at some of its multifariousness: *About Writing: 7 Essays, 4 Letters, & 5 Interviews* (Wesleyan University Press, trade paperback, \$24.95, 432 pages, ISBN 0-8195-6716-7). But even this heterogeneous parade of forms fails to convey what's inside. Truly, as the jacket copy boasts, this book is the next best thing to taking one of Delany's courses. (He currently teaches at Temple University.)

First off, we get an Introduction that's nearly sixty pages long, and brand new. "Emblems of Talent" is a hard-nosed but sympathetic survey of, among other things, the current publishing world, the nature of talent, academia, the essence of story, and the ways in which writers (beginning and otherwise) can maximize their native skills. Delany places

supreme importance on *Begeisterung*, that indefinable passion or enthusiasm for the creative act without which all else is mere window dressing. It's the lens through which talent is focused, and through which Delany assesses the various techniques he's accumulated or encountered throughout his career. He certainly exhibits this very quality in his own prose, and it's hard to argue against its centrality in the writerly life.

Delany's essays proceed to march brilliantly and with formal precision up and down the territory staked out in his introduction. (There's also a new thirty-plus-page Appendix that parallels and supplements the Introduction.) This much one expects. But why the presence of letters and interviews? Well, first off, Delany's letters and interviews are not the ones you or I might hastily produce. They are crafted just as carefully as his essays, and shine laser-like lights on the same topics. It's amazing how much work he puts into these. For instance, the interview with Lance Olsen that focuses on experimental fiction functions almost as a survey course in that area, chronicling a particular history (not the definitive history, which, as Delany points out, cannot exist) of non-normative texts. Anyone looking for a reader's guide to such books would have a decade's worth of study laid out for them here.

Certainly one of the most intriguing aspects of this book is the autobiographical angle. As with most of Delany's work, his personal life leaks out through the living pores of the page. He can honestly give us only the writer's life and lessons as he himself has experienced them—literally embodied them. "Samuel Delany" or a simulacrum thereof is

the covert protagonist of this book, and his exemplary character and career carry his observations. (Guess what the first book to make the young Delany shed a tear was: Heinlein's *Farmer in the Sky* [1950]! To find out why, you'll have to read his interview with the journal *American Literary History*.) Delany is both humble yet proud, caring yet feisty. He's paid his dues and is not shy about asserting that bittersweet fact. He honors fledgling writers and his peers by assuming that they are as serious as he is about what they hope to achieve. This attitude can result in his sometimes appearing strict and harsh, but it's the "cruel to be kind" techniques of a zen master.

Delany maintains that a writer is meant to formulate new and better questions—for herself, for her audience—and not overconfident, dogmatic answers. Nonetheless, readers will find many answers here to the mysteries of getting words down on a page.

Families Are Murder

Anyone who's enjoyed the recent short fiction collections of Holly Phillips or Sonya Taaffe should definitely pick up Sherry Decker's *Hook House and Other Horrors* (Silver Lake Publishing, trade paperback, \$12.95, 165 pages, ISBN 1-933511-09-5), a volume that matches the aforementioned in quality and vigorously and vision.

This collection holds eleven stories. Let's have a look at them.

"Hook House" conveys the cursed history of a family whose members have indulged in a generational series of murders shaped and forced by the ghostly aura surrounding their deadly domicile. A young girl, a

serial murderer, and an ancient Indian spirit haunt the pages of "Hick-lebickle Rock." "The Clan" finds a feuding vampire and a witch turning their suburban neighborhood into a vicious battleground. A second youthful female protagonist has the ability to apprehend a variety of supernatural beings in "Heat Waves."

Within the body of a remorseless convict lurks a multitudinous evil, as we learn in "Chazzabryom." The murder of a woman by her greedy niece goes all wrong for the perp in "Shivering, We Dance." A young girl named Magdalena oddly insists that Death is not final in "Gifts from the North Wind." "Twisted Wishes, Twilight Dreams" features an incubus who offers one fateful boon in return for sex.

"A City in Italy" focuses on a woman named Venice—and her alternate identity. A reclusive elderly woman, the titular "Jessica Fishbone," learns a horrible truth about herself thanks to the discovery of her mother's journal. And finally, a witch exacts a fitting vengeance for the death of her sister in "Tarissa."

As you can tell from these brief descriptions, Decker's work favors the Gothic. She walks quite confidently in the footsteps of Poe, Bradbury, Bloch, Matheson, and Shirley Jackson. Her tales deal with simple yet primal tropes. Characters have to come to grips with the dark cores of their beings, usually in the act of killing or being mortally threatened. The natural world has its share of exterior threats and pitfalls, but it's mainly the psyches of the characters that propel these tales.

Decker's prose is very alluring, not flashy, but solid and clever. She has a great way with an opening sentence or paragraph, snagging the reader instantly. She doesn't accomplish this

by offering some extravagant act, but rather by subtle evocation of place or person. For instance, the opening of "Hook House" deftly establishes the mother-daughter relation that will drive the whole story.

Decker's families are furnaces of misery, generally, with internecine rivalries. This theme pervades the book. An exception occurs in the semi-comic "The Clan," where the bond between mother and daughter witches in their battle with an egregious vampire neighbor is strong and supportive.

Decker's take on the supernatural is fresh and authentic. The weird rituals in "Tarissa" evoke a kind of body-centered folk magic that feels very organic and believable. The strange beings in "Heat Waves" genuinely feel like another order of creation coeval with ours.

Without being didactic in the least, Decker's sensitive focus on a wide gamut of exclusively female protagonists offers a feminist angle on a genre where too often women are merely the reactive objects in peril. In Decker's work, they're heroines, villains, and all types in between, moving vividly through sharply limned incidents of magic and mortality.

Past Heroes and Villains Come Alive

When it comes to the nooks and crannies of fantastical literature, critic and scholar Jess Nevins has already proven himself a fount of erudition and charm, with two sparkling books that annotate the work of Alan Moore: *Heroes & Monsters* (2003) and *A Blazing World* (2004). But his latest volume, the work of many years, blows these two admittedly capable books plain out of the

ocean. *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana* (Monkey Brain Books, hardcover, \$50.00, 1010 pages, ISBN 1-932265-15-5) is nothing more nor less than an instantly indispensable part of any serious fan's reference shelf.

What Nevins has done is to painstakingly ransack the vast literary output of the Victorian era, like some more refined and discerning Sam Moskowitz, for forgotten genre gems. He does not neglect to catalogue the famous icons either, but of necessity—Sturgeon's Law and all—the overwhelming majority of this book concerns the lesser-knowns, also-rans, unjustly neglecteds and might-have-beens. But that's a major part of the book's immense charm and value! It turns out that the substrata that supported the great writers holds as much fascination, and rewards our reading to as great a degree, as any study of Parnassus.

The book features a simple organizational scheme: alphabetical entries on the fictional characters themselves (with occasional outcroppings of places, things, or themes). Within these character-centered essays, Nevins will of course discuss the authors themselves at length. Paging with fascination through this book is like reading hundreds of miniature biographies of some of the most colorful people you could ever imagine meeting.

Nevins's prose is sprightly and clear-eyed and delightfully opinionated. He renders his story synopses economically, but without losing the essence of each work. He compares and contrasts among similar groupings of protagonists, and between dissimilar ones. And he establishes historical and literary context for everything (doing so involves discussion of many relevant early Gothic works that predate Victoria's reign).

His thematic entries shine light on such arcane topics as "Lady Detectives" and "The Räuberroman," the latter being traditional tales of noble bandits. Nevins's remit is a wide one: not all of the works he chooses to discuss feature actual non-mimetic incidents. Many are straight historical novels. (Consider John Bennett's *Master Skylark* [1897] for one.) But there's a common, easily discernible thread among all his choices. Call it "adventure" for lack of any better word. It's a signpost that has always attracted a certain venturesome crowd—such as those of you reading this column, I'm sure!

Nevins exhibits an admirable equality and fraternity toward his subjects. The products of high and low art are treated with equal seriousness, with Flaubert and Henry James consorting with Luis Senarens and the prolific Anonymous.

What strikes me most about the era so lovingly limned in this volume is its catholicity of subject matter and its sheer exuberance. These writers left no possible exotic biography unplumbed. Kings and peasants, outcasts and establishmentarians, thieves and detectives—male or female, elderly or youthful, virtuous or wicked—every possible specimen is on display here, forming a vast human tapestry. Nevins captures this quality of all-inclusiveness so well.

So many of these characters impacted millions of lives, giving great pleasure, before vanishing from the public's eye. Just consider two Franks: Frank Merriwell and Frank Reade. The lengthy mythoses of each Frank are summarized brilliantly here, and, as with all these entries, they have the effect of making me want to rush out and read some of the original texts.

It's unlikely that many of these

more obscure books and stories will ever fall under the eye of the average reader, but in Nevins's accomplished, witty documentation of a vanished era, they are reborn in our hearts and minds for a brief moment in the next-best fashion.

A Town Called Punk

In retrospect, it's easy enough to identify Jeffrey Thomas's arresting collection of linked stories, *Punktown* (2000), as a harbinger of the New Weird, which hadn't even been invented at century's turn—hadn't been labeled as such, anyhow. A defiant hybrid of SF, fantasy, surrealism, Ashcan Realism, and horror, the book appeared from Jeff VanderMeer's Ministry of Whimsy Press, itself a bastion for allied rascals. And now that there's a sequel, complete with a blurb from the Godfather of New Weird, China Miéville, the identification of Thomas's project with that exciting movement is complete.

Not that the concept of Punktown really needs any shoring-up by cliques or clagues. The venue that Thomas has created is a strong one, uniquely his own, and amenable to hosting just about any kind of tale. Punktown's receptivity to infusions of new ideas from new creators is proven in this second volume by the appearance of Jeffrey Thomas's brother, Scott Thomas, himself a writer of stature, who contributes half of the text in *Punktown: Shades of Grey* (Bedlam Press, hardcover, \$45.00, 225 pages, ISBN 1-889186-31-7).

Punktown is really the colony city named Paxton, on the alien world named Oasis. The place has the usual array of industries, residences,

monuments, and institutions, but mainly seems to function as a dumping ground for the galaxy's down-and-outers, human and otherwise. With its "crayon-bright, playground-noisy" streets continually throbbing with heterogeneous beings with radically different needs and goals, the place is more violent than Miéville's New Crobuzon combined with Steve Aylett's Beerlight. Yet there's room for pathos and nobility as well.

Jeffrey Thomas's stories read a bit more whimsical and wistful than those of Scott. (It's Jeffrey after all who titles one piece "Sweaty Betty, Termite Queen of the Danged.") Jeffrey has more affection for his creation, is more willing to let it drift organically of its own accord, whereas Scott, I feel, is intent on amping up the action, pushing the parameters of life in the city. Both are ceaselessly inventive with their cast and plotting, but Jeffrey's stories seem less metallic and brassy somehow than those of his brother. Each mode offers its own distinct pleasures, of course.

Both writers like to focus on the average citizen. There are no slices of high society life here. A bus driver ("Pulse"), a pet groomer ("Purple Wings"), an office worker ("The Hate Machines")—these are the kind of Phildickian protagonists through whom the city is filtered. But certainly they encounter the most outrageous events: killer aliens who happen to look like cute little tykes; an interdimensional leviathan stuck halfway between universes; an amusement park where living dolls are the prizes.

Like VanderMeer's *Ambergris*, *Punktown* is a place that undeniably and forcefully intrudes its existence into our bland reality, rendering our own world colorless by comparison.

Management Hair

Do you recall an episode of *The Simpsons* titled "You Only Move Twice" (1996), in which Homer and family relocated to work for a mysterious company run by a fellow named Scorpio—a company that seemed too good to be true, and yet was surprisingly creepy? If you crossed that episode with J.G. Ballard's great cynical and despairing story "War Fever," you'd begin to approach what Max Barry has accomplished in his excellent third novel, *Company* (Doubleday, hardcover, \$22.95, 338 pages, ISBN 0-385-51439-5).

Readers might recall me praising Barry's previous book, *Jennifer Government* (2003), as an updated take on the classic Pohl-Kornbluth mode of SF satire. Barry continues to exploit that angle of attack here, but tosses in elements of Herman Melville (specifically, "Bartleby the Scrivener"), Kafka, Tom Holt, Christopher Moore, Scott Adams (of *Dilbert* fame), Joseph Heller, and John Sladek (I'm thinking of his vastly overlooked "Masterton and the Clerks"). The end result is a biting satire of all things managerial and vocational. The captains of capitalism meet their match in his hyperbolic scenario.

Young Stephen Jones is starting his first real job at a company called Zephyr Holdings, Inc., of Seattle. He's to be a mere assistant in the Sales Department, and is eager to do a good job, convinced that he can rapidly work his way up to a better position. (His immediate boss, Roger, is a monomaniac currently fixated on an incident of perceived disrespect: the theft of his personal donut. This incident will reverberate ingeniously throughout the whole novel.) Stephen's fellow go-fers, Holly and Freddy, welcome him with

jaded disregard for his enthusiasm and curiosity. Little do they realize that Stephen's zestful naïvete will take him higher than they can imagine. For in quest of Zephyr's real, secret concerns, Stephen will stumble on the incredible secrets hidden on Floor 13, and become swept up in the Secret Master doings of the corporation. The seductions of one of the cabal, the lovely Eve Jantiss, will render his ethical dilemma—get everything he wants by stepping on the little people, or not?—in very solid terms of flesh and blood.

Barry has conceived of a great central conceit—which, as a responsible reviewer, I cannot ethically reveal here; check out the Ballard allusion above for a hint—which he exploits for all it's worth. The permutations of his notion are worked out in rigid detail, as in any good SF novel—which makes their surreal effects all the more startling. His characters are endearingly flawed and embraceable, his dialogue crackles and sparks. Nearly constant laughter should be the general readerly reaction, followed immediately by despair upon realizing that Barry is indeed limning the worst excesses of corporate life. His plotting is zippy, with plenty of twists and turns. In short, this novel is a joy to read.

At one point Barry has clever fun with an extended metaphor. As Senior Management (all of whom have excellent haircuts) put together the new organization chart resulting from their heartless purging and cutting and reassembling, Barry pretends that they're building a Frankenstein monster. Suddenly, all the suits come across like the mad scientists they are, without even the saving grace of Faustian hubris. It's genuinely scary. Just like the workplaces we all contend with.

Visiting Vanceland

The name Gardner Dozois might just ring a faint bell with readers of this column. Fellow who edited this magazine so dynamically and selflessly for two decades? Winner of numerous Hugo awards? Convention-going raconteur? Ah, that last one did it. Now you've placed him! Well, Gardner's departure from these pages has left him free to edit any number of other projects, including a superior original anthology titled *One Million A.D.* (SFBC, hardcover, \$13.99, 400 pages, ISBN 07394-6273-3). The book's theme is alluring, and the execution of that theme by its six contributors bold and striking.

Dozois asked his authors simply this: to portray some slice of the universe, human or otherwise, as it might look one thousand thousand years in the future. In his introduction, Dozois charts the small but brave corps of SF writers who have previously ventured into such deep expanses of the future. To my mind, the archetypal purveyor of such futures is Jack Vance, followed closely by Gene Wolfe, who took direct inspiration from Vance. In the tales by these two men the presence of the immense past that weighs on the "contemporary" milieu of the narrative is almost palpable. And, for me, that sense of eras come and gone and half-forgotten is the main attraction of this sub-genre.

Oddly enough, the writers in this volume don't really provide such a specialized frisson—maybe a little, once or twice. But they offer other thrills of estrangement that are equally valid and exciting.

Robert Reed is up first, with "Good Mountain." Humanity finds itself existing precariously on a watery world of unstable continents. Our hero, a

young teacher named Jopale, is fleeing one tectonic disaster, and perhaps unwittingly heading to another. Reed's world is exotically dangerous and well-conceived—truly alien. Jopale is something of a dreamily reactive type, which sometimes limits his attractiveness as a protagonist. But the story is carried by the sense of imminent disaster. Yet this could be a colony of mankind established, say, two hundred years in the future, and any sense of a long human history is undercut by the discontinuity.

Perhaps expectedly enough, Robert Silverberg—who has worked this mode before—comes closest to Vanceian sensations with his "A Piece of the Great World." Humanity has been long superseded by another sentient species, furred humanoids who are just reclaiming their planet after a Long Winter. Nortekku, an architect, at first begins researching his world's past simply to impress a woman. But his investigations soon bring him face to face with the Sea Lords, a decayed race that presents ethical problems.

Both the Silverberg and Reed pieces deal with worlds that are in some real sense devolved from earlier pinnacles of civilization. Nancy Kress's "Mirror Image" is the first tale here to deal with a super-high-tech future—a straight-line acceleration and projection of current trends—and it sets the pace for the rest of the book. Akilo is one of five strangely allied sisters. Living as an uploaded consciousness, she is recalled to bodily existence by the plight of one of her set, who has been accused of destroying an entire populated planet. The mystery-fiction aspect of her tale will be echoed by others here, notably Reynolds and Stross.

"Thousandth Night," by Alastair Reynolds, reminds me of George R.R. Martin in his early career, namely his *Dying of the Light* (1977). Immortal posthumans gather for a ritual celebration, when one is murdered. His murder is connected to a mysterious project known as the "Great Work," which has the potential to remake the very shape of the galaxy.

Charles Stross creates a supremely weird hybrid with "Missile Gap." He posits a mind-blowing Big Dumb Object with more than one hundred million times the acreage of a Dyson sphere, then transports our Earth circa 1962 to its surface. Think Farmer's *Riverworld* books in brief.

Finally, Greg Egan's "Riding the Crocodile" describes an enigma at the heart of the otherwise complete-

ly manicured galaxy, which two people set out to unriddle. And solving the riddle will constitute the trigger of their mutual suicide pact! The fact that it takes them over fifty thousand years to reach their goal is a mere bagatelle.

All the authors here have succeeded in creating startling, gripping venues peopled with catchy characters. The resulting stories are all top-notch. But I'm not sure they all need the theoretical passage of one million years to justify their existence. The sense of cumulative eras piled atop each other, leaving cultural detritus behind, is mostly missing. But as I said, that's just my personal touchstone for such tales. These stories stand just fine on their own merits. ○

PARADISE

I'll need no map when I get there.
I'll just bound up its golden stair
And greet the folks who welcome me,
And oh! how happy I will be.

O'er fields and streams and rocks and rills
I'll course through the Elysian hills.
What care I, if I am dead?
My cares and sorrows will have fled.

I'll live a life of endless bliss.
And every breeze will seem a kiss.
And yet, dear friend, I'll miss you much,
So write to me and keep in touch.

— Tom Disch

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TWENTY-FIRST ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) twenty-first year.

Please vote. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover artist, you liked best in the year 2006. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.137-139) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category.

Some cautions: Only material from 2006-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index**. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 1, 2007**, and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Fl., New York, NY. 10016.** You can also vote online at asimovs@dellmagazines.com, but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at www.asimovs.com.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. You are in charge here, and what you say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for your favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!

BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST COVER:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The World Science Fiction Convention returns to Denver in 2008; see you there? Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(ven)tion(s), a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

NOVEMBER 2006

17-19—PhilCon. For info, write: Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) philcon.org. (E-mail) info@philcon.org. Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Wyndham Franklin Plaza. Guests will include: Charles Stross, singer Tom Smith. The original SF con.

17-19—OryCon. orycon.org. Waterfront Marriott, Portland OR. Cory Doctorow, Ellen Datlow, V. Di Fate, M. DeMerritt.

17-19—Anime USA. animeusa.org. Sheraton, Tysons VA (DC area). G. Ayres, E. Blackwolf, C. Freeman, D. Lister, PLID.

17-19—Anime Nebraskon. animenebraskon.com. U. of NE, Lincoln NE. T. Grant, S. Spencer, Jan Scott-Frazier.

18-19—AC Cubed. ac-cubed.ca. Travelodge West, Ottawa ON. Gisele Lagace, Les Major, Lisa Furukawa Ray. Anime.

24-26—LosCon. (818) 760-9234. loscon.org. LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. W. Tenn, F. Patten. "Golden Ages of SF".

24-26—Darkover. darkovercon.com. Holiday Inn Timonium, Baltimore MD. Friedman, Kurtz, Pierce. M.Z. Bradley fans.

24-26—ChamBanaCon. turkey@chambanacon.org. Hilton, Springfield IL. Very-low-key relax-a-con.

24-26—Chicago Tardis. chicagotardis.com. Chicago IL area. Big Dr. Who convention.

24-26—BeNeLuxCon. ncsf.nl. Grand Hotel de L'Empereur, Maastricht. J. P. Hogan, A. Reynolds, T. Teng, T. O. Heuvelt.

24-26—StarBase Indy. starbaseindy.com. Marriott East, Indianapolis IN. K. Sackhoff, C. Judge, M. Colo. Star Wars.

30-Dec. 3—Auchinawa. auchinawa.org.uk. Moat House Hotel, Glasgow Scotland UK. D. Cheung, P. Gravett. Anime.

DECEMBER 2006

1-3—SMOFCon. smofcon.org. Phillips Hotel, Kansas City MO. Where convention organizers meet to talk shop.

1-3—East Meets South. eastmeetsouth.com. Quality Inn, Oxford AL. S. Celeste, Dan Guy, L. F. Ray, P. Seitz. Anime.

1-3—Anime Festival. anime-cons.com. Wyndham, Phoenix AZ. S. Bennett, C. B. Cebulski, S. Denton, K. Higgins, T. Nihei.

8-10—FlanVention. boosterevents.com. Hilton, Burbank CA. Nathan Fillion, Mark A. Sheppard. Serenity and Firefly.

30—Chibi-pa Next. chibipa.com. Meyer Amphitheatre, W. Palm Beach FL. S. Bennett, S. Celeste, C. Hazleton. Anime.

JANUARY 2007

5-7—GAFilk, 890-F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075. gafilk.org. Atlanta GA. Urban Tapestry. SF/fantasy folksinging.

5-7—OhayoCon. ohayoncon.com. Hyatt & Convention Center, Columbus OH. G. Ayers, E. & J. DeJesus, C. Glass. Anime.

12-14—Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org. Cambridge MA. Friesner, H. Scott.

12-14—RustyCon, Box 27205, Seattle WA 98165. rustycon.com. Airport Radisson. Terry Bisson, Rob Alexander, ISS.

19-21—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stiyagi.org. Detroit MI area. H. Waldrop, E. Moon, Paul Myers.

19-21—MarsCon, 4618 Olde Stone Way, Chesapeake VA 23321. marscon.net. Williamsburg VA. M. Sloan, John Ringo.

19-21—COsine, c/o 1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919. firstfridayfandom.org. C. Willis. SF/Fantasy.

AUGUST 2007

2-5—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org. Collinsville IL. 2007 No. American SF Convention. \$90.

30-Sep. 3—Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$220.

AUGUST 2008

6-10—Dervention 3, 1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919. denver2008.com. Denver CO. WorldCon. \$100.

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N	S	T	O	A	R	J	E	M
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NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY ISSUE

Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, one of today's most popular and prolific writers, under several different names in several different genres, returns with our lead story for February, painting a fascinating portrait of a lonely genius in the grip of a lifelong obsession who devotes his entire amazing career to the task of "Recovering Apollo 8"—a task that proves to be much more difficult, and, ultimately, more rewarding, than he ever dreamed!

ALSO IN FEBRUARY

Popular new writer **Jack Skillingstead** gives us the compelling story of a man wrestling with the kind of irrevocable decision that, once made, cannot be *um*made, whether or not to board "The Chimera Transit"; new writer **Charles Midwinter**, making his *Asimov's* debut, shows us that sometimes you can find inspiration in the very strangest of places, in "Portrait of the Artist"; World Fantasy Award-winner **Tanith Lee**, one of the most respected and prolific of modern fantasists, returns to tell us about the dangers of getting even anywhere *near* "Cold Fire"; new writer **Alex Wilson**, making his *Asimov's* debut, describes the strange and circuitous life-path that takes two very different people to a fateful rendezvous in space, in "Outgoing"; and new writer **William Preston**, making his second *Asimov's* appearance, introduces us to two people with otherwise nothing much in common who discover a very special reason to be "Close."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg devotes his "Reflections" column to "Rereading Jack Vance"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and, in our "Thought Experiment" feature, writer **Michael Cassutt** shares a sharp-eyed evaluation of the Space Program, plus some treasured memories of hanging out with the Astronauts, as he talks about "Me and Deke and the Paradigm Shift"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our February issue on sale at your newsstand on December 26, 2006. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*, either by mail, or online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

COMING SOON

neurotransmitter nourishing stories by **Karen Joy Fowler**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Kit Reed**, **Jim Grimsley**, **Neal Asher**, **Michael Swanwick**, **Mary Rosenblum**, **Mike Resnick**, **Nancy Kress**, **Gene Wolfe**, **Robert Silverberg**, **Jack McDevitt**, **Brian Stableford**, **Jack Skillingstead**, **Bruce McAllister**, and many others!

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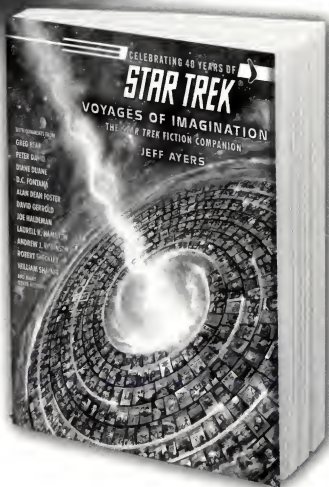
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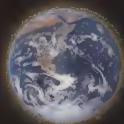
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